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English football has a long history of being suspicious of international tournaments – from the early World Cups and European Cups right up to the European Super League – so it is no surprise that the upcoming Club World Cup has been greeted with indifference by some and downright hostility by others. Of course, sceptics are right to be wary of the ever-expanding calendar. Yet *World Soccer* readers know the wealth of footballing talent, passion and history that exists outside Europe, which will be on display in the US this summer. Whisper it quietly, but maybe this tournament will actually be fun?

Jamie Evans, Managing Editor

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Henry WINTER
THE VOICE OF FOOTBALL

Manchester City and the ones that got away

What could have been...Cole Palmer left City in 2023

When Kevin De Bruyne announced in April that he would be leaving Manchester City this summer, there was the inevitable debate about who could possibly replace one of the most gifted and successful attacking midfielders to grace the Premier League. One school of thought centred around whether one of City's finest academy graduates, Cole Palmer, could return from Chelsea.

The story also focused on why on earth City allowed Palmer to leave in the first place in 2023. Simple: he wanted to play. With De Bruyne, Phil Foden and others ahead of him, Pep Guardiola eventually, and very reluctantly, granted Palmer his wish. The £42.5 million fee was deemed decent for an uncapped 21-year-old who had made only 13 starts. Palmer was known to be a big talent, and Guardiola's frustration at losing him told a story, but could anyone really have foreseen how impressively Palmer would kick on?

Palmer would not be the player he is today if he'd stayed at City. He's excelled at Chelsea because he's playing week in, week out, and averaging a goal almost every other game and one assist in four. He's worth twice as much as his original fee even with a recent dip in form. He's become an international, and is even keeping Foden out of the England starting line-up.

Yet it needs remembering that Foden has won 17 trophies, is already in the top 20 all-time City scorers and was named PFA Player of the Year for last season. Palmer got Young Player.

It's difficult to predict how extensively and at what pace a talent will ripen. Performance can be affected by off-field pressures – dealing with fame, family and

friends and the myriad distractions on offer to wealthy young men. Players mature physically and emotionally at differing rates.

Still, casting an eye around Europe, it is difficult to ignore the wealth of talent that City have let slip through their fingers.

Guardiola justified the decision to sell Morgan Rogers to Middlesbrough (for a modest £1.5m) in the summer of 2023 as they'd just won the treble and were packed with attacking talent. City cannot have expected Rogers to develop so fast under Michael Carrick at Boro and then Unai Emery at Aston Villa, but he proved his point by scoring in Villa's 2-1 defeat of City at Villa Park in December. At least City had negotiated a 25 per cent sell-on clause.

Netherlands wing-back Jeremie Frimpong spent nine years in City's academy but left after a meeting with coaches who told him he was too small. City were still smart. Having sold him to Celtic for an eventual £1m, they enjoyed a later windfall of £3m from Frimpong's sale to Bayer Leverkusen.

When City sold Liam Delap to Ipswich Town last July for £15m, there were few squeaks of protest. Delap looked a bit raw back then. Perhaps if City had known that Julian Alvarez was going to leave for Atletico Madrid in August, they might have kept Delap on as cover for Erling Haaland. But few could have imagined Delap's swift progress this season. He's a far more incisive, intelligent, sleeker striker and bound to leave Ipswich this summer for a top-ten Premier League team.

Guardiola's commitment to City's youth is seen in the prominence of Rico Lewis (20), Oscar Bobb (21), Nico O'Reilly (20) and, occasionally, James McAtee (22), let alone Foden (24). City know the obvious appeal of "one of our own" to fans and to financial sustainability. But these youngsters have to be very good and consistent – and patient – to get in the City match-day squad, let alone the starting XI.

On the day that City sold Palmer to Chelsea, they lavished £53m on Matheus Nunes from Wolves, and he's been a disappointment so far.

City make mistakes but they also make a lot of money, almost £50m from goalkeepers alone in James Trafford, Angus Gunn and Gavin Bazunu. Jadon Sancho spent only two seasons at City in their academy but has brought in around £17m. Watford did much of the development work from seven to 14, and made a maximum £3m in initial compensation plus sell-ons. City were the main beneficiaries. They sold Sancho to Borussia Dortmund for a profit of £7.5m and received an additional £9.74m sell-on when the winger moved to Manchester United for £72.9m in 2021. Around £17m for two years' work. Not bad. At the time, City had better options out wide. It made sense to sell. There has been little to show at United or Chelsea that City made a mistake.

The case of Tosin Adarabioyo is more readily explained. Competition. The Manchester-raised centre-back never made a Premier League appearance for City despite all the high hopes of academy coaches. There were too many centre-halves in the way, so Tosin left for Fulham for an eventual £2m, and made his name there instead. City's hopes of a 20 per cent sell-on windfall ended the moment Tosin saw out his Fulham contract and moved to a Chelsea on a free, but City did make £20m from Southampton on another centre-back, Taylor Harwood-Bellis. He, too, was never going to force out better centre-backs at City.

The Saints have been good for City. They made around £15m for effectively two years' stewardship of Romeo Lavia before he left for St Mary's. There are others. Brahim Diaz was moved on and has done well at Real Madrid and Milan but wasn't worth a sustained look in a Guardiola side. Still isn't – even if he did notch against his old side in the Champions League.

This is the way that City do their business and, until this season, it has served them well.

Casting an eye around Europe, it is difficult to ignore the wealth of talent that City have let slip through their fingers

Point proven... Morgan Rogers scored against City in December

• **Ask Henry:** Submit your questions to Henry Winter by subscribing to our weekly newsletter at *worldsoccer.com*

Thanks for the memories, Goodison

Everton are moving to a magnificent new stadium but it's still sad to see them leave their ancestral home of Goodison Park. So many memories flood back of the 50+ matches I've covered there. Heartbreaking games during COVID with no fans, no sounds. Derby games so deafening I couldn't hear the person next to me.

One Goodison memory will particularly remain with me. Everton had to beat Bournemouth on the final day of the 2022-23 season to stay in the Premier League. If they were relegated, Everton would be flirting with financial Armageddon. I still have the programme with Dwight McNeil on the cover. "I'm honoured to play for this club. We'll fight to give Evertonians what they deserve." And the players fought for the club's life, and won, and joy and relief swept through Goodison. Unforgettable.

Farewell, Goodison...Everton fans on the final day of 2022-23

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

Another Club World Cup

The new iteration of the Club World Cup is the latest in a long line of worldwide club competitions

Ready for kick-off ...the official Club World Cup ball

All shipshape and Bristol fashion for the long awaited expanded FIFA Club World Cup. Long awaited, at least, by Gianni Infantino, ever since October 2017. That was when the FIFA Council, one year into his presidency, agreed to all past winners of the variegated club showdowns as official world champions.

For Infantino it was rather like Alexander The Great tidying up the barracks in Macedonia before setting out to conquer the known world.

Infantino, elected in 2016 fresh out of UEFA finishing school, always had a club world event as his favoured pet project, alongside the mundane business of gifting ever-larger subsidies to his loyal subjects from World Cup profits. Back then, in the post-Blatter era, Europe supported Infantino because he was "one of us" against Asia's Shaikh Salman and did not envisage him disturbing the cosy club milieu he had served as UEFA's general secretary.

The cat sprang out of the bag the following spring after informal consultations with the Spanish and Italian leagues. Infantino's plan, even then, was not far off the eventual mark: cancel the unloved December Club World Cup, open a summer fixture slot by scrapping the FIFA Confederations Cup, and create a 24-team four-week tournament in 2021, possibly in China, to delight sponsors and television.

All was well until a leak in Germany that Infantino might finance the project with a $25 billion sale of FIFA's media rights to backers tied in with Saudi Arabia and the Japanese investment conglomerate SoftBank.

FIFA Council put up a rare show of resistance. Then came the pandemic and everything changed. Kick-off was delayed to 2025 and the field expanded to 32 with a staging in the United States as a promotion for the FIFA World Cup itself. All good? Not yet. Ticket sales have been patchy and major broadcasters' reticence has meant *DAZN* being dragged in with Saudi support to supply coverage.

All so unedifying and a far cry from the days of the first world club cups when football was the priority. The English amateurs of West Auckland laid claim to a first in 1909 and 1911. Brazil's Palmeiras registered a 1951 home success in Rio de Janeiro in the Torneio Internacional de Clubes Campeoes followed by the Pequeno Copa del Mundo in Caracas between 1952 and 1957.

Then, in the early 1960s, came the all-too-brief heyday of world club competition.

UEFA general secretary Henri Delaunay suggested capitalising on the success of the fledgling European Cup by throwing down a gauntlet to the champions of Europe and South America in 1958. CONMEBOL enthusiastically launched the Copa Libertadores to enable the creation of the original world club cup in 1960.

The rules of this Intercontinental Cup proved ultimately destructive since, up until 1968, winners were decided on points with a play-off if needed, not aggregate scores.

A flying start was made by Real Madrid and Penarol. Madrid had just won their fifth European Cup in a row by demolishing Eintracht Frankfurt 7-3 while Penarol were inaugural Libertadores holders. The first leg, in rain-swept Montevideo, was goalless before Madrid triumphed 5-1 at the Bernabeu. Ferenc Puskas struck twice with Alfredo Di Stefano also on target. A combined attendance of close to 200,000 saw the matches.

In 1961, it was Penarol's turn to celebrate five goals, this time against the emerging Portuguese Eagles of Benfica. A solitary Mario Coluna goal in the first leg forced a decider that Penarol only just managed to win 2-1 at home against a Benfica bolstered by the young Eusebio.

Benfica represented Europe again in 1962 but this time ran headlong into Brazil's brilliant Santos. Pele scored twice in a 3-2 win in Rio then followed up with a breathtaking hat-trick in a 5-2 triumph in Lisbon. Santos retained the trophy in 1963 but their victory over Milan in a turbulent play-off provided a nasty foretaste of trouble ahead with two expulsions and bitter Italian complaints about the refereeing by Argentinian Juan Brozzi.

The next two editions were contested by Internazionale and Independiente with the Italians, led by Luis Suarez, Sandro Mazzola and Giacinto Facchetti, winning each time. Penarol claimed revenge victory over Real Madrid in 1966 before it all started to go downhill with the bad-tempered farce between Argentina's Racing Club and Celtic.

Feelings in Argentina were still running high over events at the 1966 World Cup. After a 1-0 Celtic win in Glasgow, the return in El Cilindro was chaotic. Celtic goalkeeper Ronnie Simpson was struck by a missile from the crowd before kick-off and had to be replaced. Racing won 2-1 to set up a decider, in Montevideo, which was doomed before it began. Celtic lost composure under extreme provocation and had four men dismissed. Racing had two men sent off of their own, but won 1-0.

Worse, the next South Americans – for three years running – were the anarchic super-cynics of Estudiantes de La Plata. Their grim victory over Manchester United brought expulsions for Nobby Stiles in Argentina and for Jose Hugo Medina and George Best at Old Trafford. Milan came off even worse the next year but at least won after a savaging in Buenos Aires. Their centre-forward Nestor Combin had his nose broken and was then briefly detained for missing military service.

Three Estudiantes players were imprisoned for shaming the nation but they did not learn the lesson. They lost again in 1970, to Feyenoord, whose bespectacled Joop van Daele had his glasses trodden into the pitch before scoring the winner. Wisely, Ajax then refused to take the risk, setting a pattern for on/off participation by successive European champions.

The event was dying on its feet until rescue from an unlikely direction – Japan. In 1980, the two-legged tie was replaced by a single game at the National Stadium in Tokyo at the behest of Japanese officials plotting an eventual bid for the World Cup finals. Toyota underwrote the costs as sponsor.

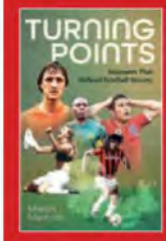
The South Americans were delighted. Their clubs have always set greater store by the world champion allure, none more impressive than Zico's Flamengo against Liverpool in 1981. FIFA later took over the show with a mini-tournament to curry political favour with the other four noisily envious confederations.

Certainly, a strong case can be built for a club world cup but none of the iterations thus far have fitted the bill. What chance for Infantino's baby?

Infantino always had a club world event as his favoured pet project

International incident...police intervene in the bad-tempered 1967 clash between Racing and Celtic

BOOKS THIS MONTH



TURNING POINTS
By Marios Mantzos
(Pitch Publishing, £16.99)

Turning Points: Moments that Defined Football History dives into the archives to reveal some of the most important stories from the annals of the beautiful game. Discover how the FA's decision to ban women's football in 1921 changed the course of the whole game, how Marc-Vivien Foe's death in 2003 led to crucial changes that saved Christian Eriksen's life 18 years later, and how Frank Lampard's "ghost goal" versus Germany in 2010 galvanised the debate on goal-line technology.

1978
By Ryan Foley
(Pitch Publishing, £16.99)

1978: The Birth of Moneyed Modern Football is the tumultuous yet captivating story of when new clashed with old, madness gave way to genius, and innovation collided with custom. Maverick stars, trailblazers, famed managers, legendary trophy-winning sides, apocalyptic showdowns and developments that changed the fabric of the game all feature.

Jonathan WILSON

TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Go long

Short-passing goalkeepers are almost ubiquitous in the Premier League. Something has to change

There is a paradox in modern football, which is that attacks have become more risk-averse than ever before, while defences take more risks than ever before. Brian Clough would berate players for playing square balls across the back as an entirely needless affectation that risked giving up easy opportunities to the opposition, yet he had no problem with players taking on long-range shots. Now, Chelsea manager Enzo Maresca threatens to drop players for shooting when the probability of scoring is low while Robert Sanchez is encouraged to pass short from the back.

In 2005-06, 48.2 per cent of all shots in the Premier League were attempted from outside the box. That has fallen to 31.7 per cent this season. Or to offer concrete numbers rather than proportions: the rolling average of shots per game from outside the box has fallen from 12.8 in the five years to 2011-12, to 8.8 in the five years to 2023-24. But at the other end, risk is encouraged. Over the past decade, goalkeeper passes per game have risen from around 26 to around 32, with short passes trebling from around 5.5 to nearly 18.

Risk-taking keepers ...Arsenal's David Raya is caught out by Jean-Philippe Mateta's lob

Passing out from the back was a key part of Johan Cruyff's philosophy. He insisted that Jan Jongbloed of FC Amsterdam should be the Netherlands goalkeeper at the 1974 World Cup rather than Ajax's Heinz Stuy because he believed he was better with the ball at his feet. Later, as Ajax manager in the 1980s, he used Stanley Menzo as a sweeper-keeper. If he was lobbed twice a season, Cruyff argued, those goals stuck in the mind, while all those goals he prevented by playing a long way off his line, or helped create for his own side by being part of the build-up, were forgotten or ignored.

And there is clearly still some truth to that. A style of play should not be invalidated just because it leads to a couple of mistakes that are so obvious as to be visible to everybody. But equally, as pressing has improved, so it feels that football is reaching a crisis point. Teams like Burnley last season and Southampton this have been relegated in part because the "progressive" style that brought promotion has been exposed by higher-quality opponents in the Premier League. Errors by goalkeepers leading to goals are on the rise (they initially fell as short passes started to rise but are now above four per cent, the highest rate since 2019-20). Similarly, short pass accuracy is at its lowest rate in a decade, with West

> Playing the ball out from the back, having become de rigueur, is now a risk again. The obvious solution is to start going long

There are countless recent examples of attempts to pass out from the back going wrong. There was Arijanet Muric for Ipswich v Manchester City, Jordan Pickford for Everton at Tottenham, Bernd Leno for Fulham at West Ham... Even Arsenal, in an otherwise almost immaculate performance against Real Madrid, gifted them a goal shortly after taking the lead in the second leg of their Champions League quarter-final; a week later, Gunners keeper David Raya's risky positioning was punished by a superb Jean-Philippe Mateta strike for Crystal Palace.

Defying convention... Nottingham Forest's Matz Sels is the only current Premier League goalkeeper that prioritises long kicks

Ham's Alphonse Areola the worst offender among regular starters.

That speaks of how good teams have got at closing down opponents. Playing the ball out from the back, having become de rigueur, is now a risk again. The obvious solution is to start going long, and there has, recently, been a re-emergence of the big number nine – the likes of Chris Wood, Jorgen Strand Larsen, Liam Delap, even Erling Haaland. But for goalkeepers to kick long is a return to the 1980s when football was a game of position rather than possession.

Mark Flekken and Pickford are the two keepers who have played the most accurate long balls per game this season, but even they are accurate significantly less than half the time; a long ball may set up a chance against a retreating defence, it may lead to a flick-on or nod-down and possession retained, but more often than not the ball is lost – 60 or 70 yards from your own goal, admittedly, but lost nonetheless.

It then becomes a matter of risk and reward: is it better to risk losing the ball infrequently in a dangerous area or frequently in a less dangerous area? Part of the problem is that it's very hard for a goalkeeper to adapt to circumstance; if a couple of players have come short to receive a pass and a goalkeeper goes long, then an opponent winning the ball can surge through without having to worry about offside.

It feels, though, that an inflexion point is being reached, that while playing out from the back will continue to be the way sides who expect to dominate possession play, that orthodoxy is being challenged. Nottingham Forest have done just that this season, flying way above expectations with a goalkeeper that goes long with over 80 per cent of his kicks, far more than any other regular keeper in the league.

Sometimes it makes sense to be more physical. Sometimes it makes sense to get the ball away from goal, to be more pragmatic. Put simply, it makes sense only for the very best teams to take more risks in their own box than their opponent's.

Konstantinos KARETSAS

(Genk & Greece)

The future is bright for Greek football, with a number of promising talents emerging at the country's leading teams. Yet perhaps their brightest hope was developed in Belgium.

Born in Genk to Greek parents, Karetsas won 20 caps for Belgium's youth sides, before switching his allegiance in March of this year.

His progress to senior international football was accelerated by the fact that he'd scored for Genk's reserves in the Belgian second tier when he was only 15 and then justified by his goal v Scotland in March's Nations League play-offs, becoming Greece's youngest-ever scorer.

At just 17, the attacking midfielder or winger is already a regular in Genk's title-chasing team.

Diego LEON

(Cerro Porteno & Paraguay)

The 18-year-old left-back will join Manchester United this summer after building a reputation as one of the world's most talented teenagers.

Mohamed AMOURA

(Wolfsburg & Algeria)

The diminutive forward is on loan at Wolfsburg from Union Saint-Gilloise, sister club of Brighton, and is red-hot property after surpassing 20 goal contributions for club and country this season.

Lucas STASSIN

(Saint-Etienne & Belgium)

Les Verts' hopes of Ligue 1 survival were given a boost by their 20-year-old striker finding his feet after arriving last summer, scoring eight goals in seven games across March and April.

Santiago LONDONO

(Envigado & Colombia)

Only one player scored more goals than the young Colombian forward at the recent South American Under-17 Championship, as *Los Cafeteros* finished runners-up on home soil.

Harry GRAY

(Leeds United & England)

The younger brother of Tottenham's Archie made his senior debut at the age of 16 in Leeds' 6-0 win over Stoke City. Leeds will be back in the Premier League again next season after sealing promotion from the Championship.

"Under his guidance, Trinidad & Tobago reached the World Cup for the first time…he was more than a tactician – he was a leader who respected the culture, earned our trust and inspired a nation"

Trinidad & Tobago head coach Dwight Yorke on the late Leo Beenhakker

OBITUARIES

Final role… Beenhakker as Poland coach

Leo BEENHAKKER (1942–2025)
Beenhakker was a modest player before developing as an outstanding coach at Veendam, Cambuur, Go Ahead Eagles, Ajax, Real Zaragoza and Volendam. An admirer of Rinus Michels, he led Ajax to the Dutch title in his first season there.

Later hired by Real Madrid, "Don Leo" brought together the *Quinta del Buitre*, led by Emilio Butragueno, and won La Liga in 1987, 1988 and 1989. Later he was a Dutch league winner again with Feyenoord, before leading Netherlands to the 1990 World Cup where they lost a bitter last-16 tie against West Germany.

A career that saw him lead 19 different teams, in some cases in multiple stints, ended with the Poland national team, who he led to a first-ever European Championship finals in 2008.

Carlton FAIRWEATHER (1961–2025)
A winger for Wimbledon's infamous Crazy Gang side of the 1980s and early '90s, who later worked as a coach for the Dons and then Crystal Palace and Sunderland.

Wilhelm BURGSMULLER (1932–2025)
Stalwart right-back who played 241 league games for Borussia Dortmund, his only senior club, between 1952 and 1964. German champion in 1956, 1957 and then as captain in 1963. Member of the Dortmund side beaten by Manchester United's pre-Munich Busby Babes in the European Cup first round in 1956–57.

Andrija DELIBASIC (1981–2025)
Yugoslav youth striker who hit six goals in 21 games at senior level for Montenegro. Starred at Partizan before wandering Europe with Mallorca, Benfica, Braga, AEK Athens, Real Sociedad, Hercules and Rayo Vallecano among others.

Joe THOMPSON (1989–2025)
Midfielder with Rochdale, Tranmere and Carlisle who twice returned to playing after being diagnosed with cancer. On the final day of the 2017-18 season he scored the goal that kept Rochdale in League One, before retiring in February 2019.

Christian CHUKWU (1951–2025)
Captain of Nigeria's first Africa Cup of Nations-winning side in 1980 and later also coach of the national team. The defender's playing career was spent at Enugu Rangers where he also served as manager. Also coached Kenya.

Nikola POKRIVAC (1985–2025)
Former Croatia midfielder with 15 caps including at Euro 2008, who played his club football for Varteks, Rijeka, Dinamo Zagreb, Monaco and Red Bull Salzburg.

Werner OTTO (1929–2025)
Otto was one of the last survivors from the first round of the inaugural European Cup in 1955–56 when he played outside right for Saarbrucken against Milan. The Saarland was then briefly an independent territory and Otto scored one goal in six internationals. These included the home and away 1954 World Cup qualifying defeats to West Germany.

Jorge BOLANO (1977–2025)
Colombia midfielder who played at the 1998 World Cup. Won the Colombian national title twice with Junior then the 2002 Coppa Italia with Parma.

Lionel JUSTIER (1956–2025)
PSG academy graduate who made 47 Ligue 1 appearances for the club before starring for Paris FC, Brest and Nimes.

Jacques ELONG ELONG (1985–2025)
A one-time Cameroon midfielder, Elong Elong left Douala at 20 for Iran where he played three years for Persepolis, winning the 2008 league title. He later moved to Slovakia's DAC, Iran's Esteghlal (winning the cup) and Naft Maysan in Iraq.

Werner LORANT (1948–2025)
Defensive midfielder and long-standing Bundesliga coach who took 1860 Munich from the third tier to Champions League qualification. He coached there from 1992 to 2001 before embarking on a journeyman career at clubs in Turkey, South Korea, Cyprus, Iran, China and Slovakia. As a player he was a UEFA Cup winner with Eintracht Frankfurt in 1980.

Rochdale hero… Joe Thompson

Croatia international …Pokrivac in 2008

Serie A star…Bolano at Parma in 2002

Panthers superstar …Boupendza scored eight goals for Gabon

Marijan JANTOLJAK (1940–2025)
Former Yugoslavia goalkeeper who won two caps for his country in 1966. At club level Jantoljak played for Rijeka between 1960 and 1972, converting 15 penalties.

MANGA (1937–2025)
Manga, full name Hailton Correa de Arruda, was Botafogo's star goalkeeper in the 1960s but was restricted to only 12 Brazil caps, including at the 1966 World Cup, by the pre-eminence of Gilmar.

He won the Rio championship four times with Botafogo, four Uruguayan titles and the 1971 Copa Libertadores and Intercontinental Cup with Nacional, and then three Gaucho state titles back in Brazil with Internacional.

A Botafogo statement described Manga as "one of the greatest goalkeepers in our history."

Djamel MENAD (1960–2025)
Star forward who scored 25 goals in 81 internationals for Algeria between 1980 and 1995, including the 1986 World Cup finals and the 1980 Moscow Olympics. Menad's career pinnacle was top-scoring with four goals in leading the hosts to success at the 1990 AFCON. Also won the CAF Champions League, Super Cup and Cup Winners' Cup with JS Kabylie.

Aaron BOUPENDZA (1996–2025)
Gabon striker who competed at the 2021 AFCON finals and won the last of his 35 caps in September 2023.

Boupendza had been playing his club football in China for Zhejiang FC after leaving Rapid Bucharest in January. The striker had a nomadic career that began in Gabon with CF Mounana and included stints in France, Portugal, United States, Qatar, Romania, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Gabon's president-elect Gen Brice Clotaire Oligui Nguema described him as "a talented centre-forward who brought honour to Gabonese football," while several players in MLS paid tribute to the former Cincinnati striker, including international team-mate Denis Bouanga, who revealed a touching message to his friend under his shirt after scoring for LAFC.

Words by Keir Radnedge & Mark Gleeson

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"This city. This club. These people gave me everything. I had no choice but to give everything back. And guess what – we won everything. Whether we like it or not, it's time to say goodbye"

Kevin De Bruyne announces that he will be leaving Manchester City this summer after a decade at the club

12 MOVES *you might have missed...*

TRANSFERS ★ LOANS ★ SACKINGS ★ HIRINGS ★ SWITCHES ★ RETIREMENTS

DORIVAL

Brazil sacked their head coach in the wake of March's 4-1 defeat to Argentina, with rumours again swirling that Real Madrid boss Carlo Ancelotti will take charge.

Jesus CASAS

The Spaniard was fired by **Iraq** shortly after losing 2-1 to Palestine in World Cup qualifying. A former assistant coach of Spain, he led the Asian team for just over two years.

Pedro CAIXINHA

The former Rangers manager was sacked by Brazilian giants **Santos** less than four months after being appointed following a winless start to the national league season.

Fabio CANNAVARO

With **Dinamo Zagreb** in danger of missing out on the Croatian title for only the second time since 2005, the Italian was shown the exit door after less than four months as coach.

Zsolt LOW

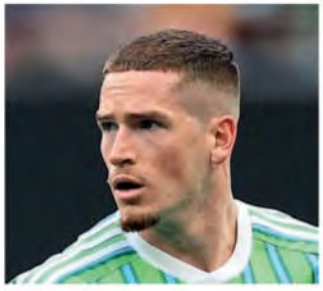
The Hungarian, who has previously worked as assistant to Ralf Rangnick, Ralph Hasenhuttl and Thomas Tuchel, took interim charge of **RB Leipzig** to replace the sacked Marco Rose.

Joaquin CAPARROS

With **Sevilla** flirting with relegation in La Liga, they dismissed Garcia Pimienta as coach and appointed Caparros for the fourth time – no manager has led the club as often.

Steve HOLLAND

Gareth Southgate's former assistant was another manager to only last four months in his job, sacked by **Yokohama F. Marinos** with the side in the J. League bottom three.



Ryan KENT

The former Liverpool and Rangers winger, who has been a free agent since leaving Turkish side Fenerbahce last October, joined Major League Soccer outfit **Seattle Sounders**.

Victor WANYAMA

The former Celtic, Southampton, Tottenham Hotspur, CF Montreal and Kenya midfielder joined Scottish second-tier side **Dunfermline Athletic** on a free transfer.

Jan VERTONGHEN

The **Anderlecht** captain, who played 315 times for Tottenham and won a record 157 caps for Belgium, announced that he will retire at the end of this season.

Mats HUMMELS

Another legendary defender to announce that he will hang up his boots. The 36-year-old made over 500 appearances for Dortmund before joining **Roma** last year.

Thomas MULLER

Bayern Munich confirmed that this will be the veteran attacker's final season at the club. Muller is Bayern's record appearance maker, and only two players have scored more goals.

"We are proposing, for the only time, to hold this anniversary with 64 teams, on three continents simultaneously, so that all countries have the opportunity to live a global experience"

CONMEBOL president Alejandro Dominguez proposes an expansion to the 2030 World Cup

The month in numbers

The facts and stats that have caught our eye in the world of football this month...

19
Bundesliga clubs that Harry Kane has scored against since arriving in Germany in 2023 – every single team that he's faced.

2
Asian Under-17 Championships won by Uzbekistan after they defeated hosts Saudi Arabia 2-0 in this year's final.

57
League titles won by Northern Irish side Linfield, extending their record as the country's most successful club.

4
Bundesliga sides that third-tier Arminia Bielefeld have beaten on their way to this season's German Cup final – a record for a club outside the top two leagues.

15
Years and 271 days old, the age of Leicester City's Jeremy Monga when he became the second-youngest player in Premier League history.

Teenage talent... Leicester's Jeremy Monga

2
Football clubs owned by Matthew Benham, after the Brentford owner purchased Spanish third-tier side Merida AD through his new holding company Best Intentions Analytics.

Going up...fans of RAAL La Louviere celebrate their promotion

4
Promotions that Belgian side RAAL La Louviere have achieved in seven seasons after securing a spot in the top flight for the first time in their history.

5
English clubs that will compete in next season's Champions League after securing top spot in UEFA's coefficient rankings.

2027
Year that Mohamed Salah and captain Virgil van Dijk's contracts at Liverpool will expire after the duo penned new deals at Anfield.

29
Goals that Poland striker Robert Lewandowski has scored in just 28 games against his former club Borussia Dortmund.

104
Goals scored for Real Madrid by Ronaldo, the club record for a Brazilian player, until Vinicius Junior overtook him in April.

1
Under-17 Africa Cup of Nations titles won by Morocco after they defeated Mali on penalties in the 2025 final on home soil.

5%
Reported stake that Real Madrid and Croatia legend Luka Modric has purchased in Championship side Swansea City.

48
Greek championship titles won by Olympiacos, who secured their latest record-extending crown in April.

13
Champions League goals scored by Borussia Dortmund and Guinea striker Serhou Guirassy in the 2024-25 campaign, a record for an African player in a single season.

75%
Percentage of top-flight head coaches that get sacked within one year of being appointed, according to research by the CIES Football Observatory.

51
Years since Bologna last reached the final of the Coppa Italia, with the *Rossoblu* set to take on Milan in this year's showdown in Rome.

£10m
Fee agreed between Brighton and Sunderland for Tom Watson, with the 19-year-old winger set to join the Seagulls this summer.

14
Under-17 South American titles won by Brazil after they triumphed in the 2025 edition in Colombia, beating the hosts on penalties in the final after a 1-1 draw.

107
Number of days Ivan Juric was Southampton manager, as the Saints recorded the earliest relegation in Premier League history with seven games to spare.

400
Career goals scored by Romelu Lukaku – 312 in club football and 88 for Belgium – who surpassed the milestone after scoring for Napoli against Milan.

Another milestone ...Lukaku celebrates scoring v Milan

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

MARCH 2025

SEASON RANKINGS
Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

Jan Oblak (Atletico Madrid)	12
Alisson (Liverpool)	8
Yann Sommer (Internazionale)	6
David Raya (Arsenal)	5
Matz Sels (Nottingham Forest)	5
Thibaut Courtois (Real Madrid)	4
Emiliano Martinez (Aston Villa)	4
Michele Di Gregorio (Juventus)	3
Caoimhin Kelleher (Liverpool)	3
Alex Meret (Napoli)	3
Manuel Neuer (Bayern Munich)	3
David De Gea (Fiorentina)	2
Peter Gulacsi (RB Leipzig)	2
Franco Israel (Sporting)	2
Inaki Pena (Barcelona)	2
Wojciech Szczesny (Barcelona)	2
Noah Atubolu (Freiburg)	1
Marco Carnesecchi (Atalanta)	1
Lucas Chevalier (Lille)	1
Kepa Arrizabalaga (Bournemouth)	1
Mike Maignan (Milan)	1
Simon Mignolet (Club Brugge)	1
Vanja Milinkovic-Savic (Torino)	1
Djordje Petrovic (Strasbourg)	1
Lukasz Skorupski (Bologna)	1
Kevin Trapp (Eintracht Frankfurt)	1
Michael Zetterer (Werder Bremen)	1

DEFENDERS

Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool)	32
Trent Alexander-Arnold (Liverpool)	21
Federico Dimarco (Internazionale)	14
Giovanni Di Lorenzo (Napoli)	11
Achraf Hakimi (PSG)	10
Gabriel (Arsenal)	9
Antonio Rudiger (Real Madrid)	9
Denzel Dumfries (Internazionale)	8
Nuno Mendes (PSG)	7
Pau Cubarsi (Barcelona)	6
Willi Orban (RB Leipzig)	6
William Saliba (Arsenal)	6
Jonathan Tah (Bayer Leverkusen)	6
Raul Asencio (Real Madrid)	5
Alessandro Bastoni (Internazionale)	5
Alphonso Davies (Bayern Munich)	5
Alex Grimaldo (Bayer Leverkusen)	5
Kim Min-jae (Bayern Munich)	5
Alejandro Balde (Barcelona)	4
Bremer (Juventus)	4
Riccardo Calafiori (Arsenal)	4
Jose Maria Gimenez (Atletico Madrid)	4
Josko Gvardiol (Manchester City)	4
Isak Hien (Atalanta)	4
Ibrahima Konate (Liverpool)	4
Jules Kounde (Barcelona)	4
Marcos Llorente (Atletico Madrid)	4
Francesco Acerbi (Internazionale)	3
Ruben Dias (Manchester City)	3
Eder Militao (Real Madrid)	3
Federico Gatti (Juventus)	3
Clement Lenglet (Atletico Madrid)	3
Inigo Martinez (Barcelona)	3
Andy Robertson (Liverpool)	3
Dayot Upamecano (Bayern Munich)	3
Ramy Bensebaini (B. Dortmund)	2
Conor Bradley (Liverpool)	2
Alessandro Buongiorno (Napoli)	2
Dani Carvajal (Real Madrid)	2
Marc Cucurella (Chelsea)	2
Lucas Digne (Aston Villa)	2
Robin Gosens (Fiorentina)	2
Theo Hernandez (Milan)	2
Dean Huijsen (Bournemouth)	2
Sead Kolasinac (Atalanta)	2
Gianluca Mancini (Roma)	2
Nikola Milenkovic (Nottingham Forest)	2
Murillo (Nottingham Forest)	2
Nico Schlotterbeck (B. Dortmund)	2
Dani Vivian (Athletic Club)	2
Ola Aina (Nottingham Forest)	1
Angelino (Roma)	1
Dan Burn (Newcastle United)	1
Juan Cabal (Juventus)	1
Andrea Cambiaso (Juventus)	1
Stefan de Vrij (Internazionale)	1
Ousmane Diomande (Sporting)	1
Dodo (Fiorentina)	1
Jeremie Frimpong (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Matthias Ginter (Freiburg)	1
Raphael Guerreiro (Bayern Munich)	1
Jorrel Hato (Ajax)	1
Caio Henrique (Monaco)	1
Piero Hincapie (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Moritz Jenz (Mainz)	1
Juan Jesus (Napoli)	1
Dominik Kohr (Mainz)	1
Myles Lewis-Skelly (Arsenal)	1
Diego Llorente (Real Betis)	1
Ferland Mendy (Real Madrid)	1
Tyrone Mings (Aston Villa)	1
Pedro Porro (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
David Raum (RB Leipzig)	1
Amir Rrahmani (Napoli)	1
Oumar Solet (Udinese)	1
John Stones (Manchester City)	1
Nicolas Tagliafico (Lyon)	1
Edmond Tapsoba (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Jurrien Timber (Arsenal)	1
Pau Torres (Aston Villa)	1
Jan Paul van Hecke (Brighton)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Florian Wirtz (Bayer Leverkusen)	18
Cole Palmer (Chelsea)	17
Jamal Musiala (Bayern Munich)	14
Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	12
Pedri (Barcelona)	11
Federico Valverde (Real Madrid)	11
Jude Bellingham (Real Madrid)	10
Ryan Gravenberch (Liverpool)	10
Dominik Szoboszlai (Liverpool)	9
Charles De Ketelaere (Atalanta)	6
Rodrigo De Paul (Atletico Madrid)	6
Martin Odegaard (Arsenal)	5
Michael Olise (Bayern Munich)	5
Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa (Napoli)	4
Hakan Calhanoglu (Internazionale)	4
Declan Rice (Arsenal)	4
Marten de Roon (Atalanta)	3
Phil Foden (Manchester City)	3
Scott McTominay (Napoli)	3
Adrien Rabiot (Marseille)	3
Tijjani Reijnders (Milan)	3
Vitinha (PSG)	3
Marc Casado (Barcelona)	2
Davide Frattesi (Internazionale)	2
Leon Goretzka (Bayern Munich)	2
Bruno Guimaraes (Newcastle United)	2
Giovani Lo Celso (Real Betis)	2
Mikel Merino (Arsenal)	2
Henrikh Mkhitaryan (Internazionale)	2
Joao Neves (PSG)	2
Granit Xhaka (Bayer Leverkusen)	2
Nadiem Amiri (Mainz)	1
Nicolo Barella (Internazionale)	1
Moises Caicedo (Chelsea)	1
Eduardo Camavinga (Real Madrid)	1
Johnny Cardoso (Real Betis)	1
Mikkel Damsgaard (Brentford)	1
Angel Di Maria (Benfica)	1
Fabian Ruiz (PSG)	1
Fermin Lopez (Barcelona)	1
Bruno Fernandes (Manchester United)	1
Enzo Fernandez (Chelsea)	1
Morgan Gibbs-White (Nott'm Forest)	1
Morten Hjulmand (Sporting)	1
Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg (Marseille)	1
Ardon Jashari (Club Brugge)	1
Stanislav Lobotka (Napoli)	1
Alexis Mac Allister (Liverpool)	1
James Maddison (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Luka Modric (Real Madrid)	1
Matheus Nunes (Manchester City)	1
Dani Olmo (Barcelona)	1
Aleksandar Pavlovic (Bayern Munich)	1
Rodri (Manchester City)	1
Jesus Rodriguez (Real Betis)	1
Oihan Sancet (Athletic Club)	1
Bernardo Silva (Manchester City)	1
Malik Tillman (PSV)	1
Lucas Torreira (Galatasaray)	1
Hans Vanaken (Club Brugge)	1
Joey Veerman (PSV)	1
Piotr Zielinski (Internazionale)	1

FORWARDS

Mohamed Salah (Liverpool)	38
Robert Lewandowski (Barcelona)	30
Kylian Mbappe (Real Madrid)	27
Harry Kane (Bayern Munich)	22
Ousmane Dembele (PSG)	13
Lamine Yamal (Barcelona)	13
Raphinha (Barcelona)	12
Erling Haaland (Manchester City)	11
Viktor Gyokeres (Sporting)	9
Alexander Isak (Newcastle United)	8
Omar Marmoush (Manchester City)	8
Vinicius Junior (Real Madrid)	6
Antoine Griezmann (Atletico Madrid)	5
Rodrygo (Real Madrid)	5
Cody Gakpo (Liverpool)	4
Khvicha Kvaratskhelia (PSG)	4
Ademola Lookman (Atalanta)	4
Lautaro Martinez (Internazionale)	4
Kerem Akturkoglu (Benfica)	3
Bradley Barcola (PSG)	3
Mateo Retegui (Atalanta)	3
Bukayo Saka (Arsenal)	3
Patrik Schick (Bayer Leverkusen)	3
Serhou Guirassy (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Justin Kluivert (Bournemouth)	2
Riccardo Orsolini (Bologna)	2
Mattia Zaccagni (Lazio)	2
Samu Aghehowa (Porto)	1
Desire Doue (PSG)	1
Jamie Gittens (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Kai Havertz (Arsenal)	1
Joao Pedro (Brighton)	1
Randal Kolo Muani (Juventus)	1
Kaoru Mitoma (Brighton)	1
Lois Openda (RB Leipzig)	1
Alassane Plea (Borussia M'gladbach)	1
Christian Pulisic (Milan)	1
Leroy Sane (Bayern Munich)	1
Giuliano Simeone (Atletico Madrid)	1
Alexander Sorloth (Atletico Madrid)	1
Matias Soule (Roma)	1
Chemsdine Talbi (Club Brugge)	1
Marcus Thuram (Internazionale)	1
Timothy Weah (Juventus)	1
Nico Williams (Athletic Club)	1
Chris Wood (Nottingham Forest)	1

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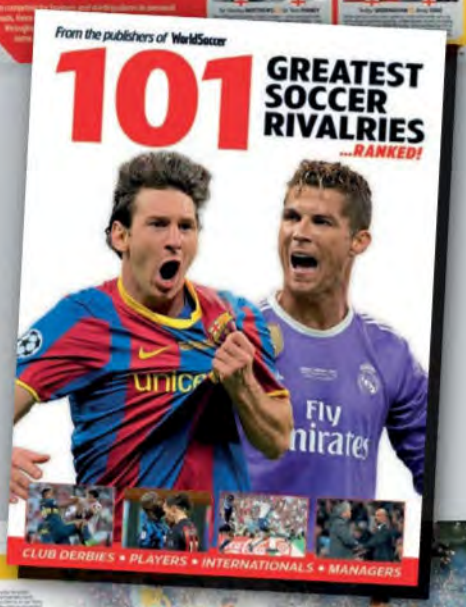

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Together...HNK Vukovar players form a huddle
Photo credit: Mb Creative Media

eyewitness

Peterjon Cresswell reports

CROATIA

'This name has so much potential'

"Vukovar! Vukovar!"

Wherever the Croatia national team has played since its independence 34 years ago, this chant has always been heard. Along with fans in the signature red-and-white chequerboard colours, a banner is unfurled proclaiming the name of this city by the Danube.

"For all Croatians worldwide, the global diaspora, Vukovar has a particular status," says Markus Buzov, owner of local club, HNK Vukovar 1991. "It gives rise to special emotions."

Symbolised by its devastated water tower, Vukovar owes its prominence in the Croatian psyche to the city's heroic 87-day stand against superior Serbian forces at the start of the war that broke up Yugoslavia.

"I have a very personal relationship with Vukovar," reveals the 45-year-old German Buzov, who assumed control of the club at the height of the COVID pandemic five years ago. "My parents were from Vukovar. Before the war, we came here every year for our holidays. My wife was only four years old when she and her family lived through the whole siege. She was among the refugees that streamed out of the city after it fell on November 18, 1991." Hundreds of soldiers and civilians were killed and some 20,000 residents displaced.

Now Buzov is part of the revival of the city, which began with urban rebuilding in the early 2000s. The club that has embraced Vukovar's defiant identity currently stands neck-and-neck with Opatija for the single automatic promotion spot to Croatia's top-flight HNL. The two teams will meet on the final day of the season.

If Buzov's men succeed, they will be repeating the feat of their predecessors. Vukovar '91 were founded by refugees and achieved promotion to Croatia's top division in 1999. After a single season with the elite, they dropped down to the second tier, then third, before folding in 2012.

After initial middling seasons in the lower rungs, the new entity look like heading back to the upper echelons.

"When I came here during the winter break of 2020-21, we were rock bottom of Division 3 East with only four points from 15 games," recalls Buzov, a credit assessor from Frankfurt with Croatian

HNK Vukovar 1991 owner... Markus Buzov

parents and a life-long love of the beautiful game. "It was a very bad situation. That was when I decided to take up this mission, but I insisted on having my hands free to make the big decisions myself.

"I immediately brought in 12 new players, a mix of Croatian and international, all with a good football education. We drew our first match, then won our second, 5-0."

Vukovar shot up the table, came within a whisker of promotion to the second tier, then achieved it the very next year after two play-off victories at tricky away grounds.

Part of that initial cohort of new recruits, Colombian No.10 Robin Gonzalez personifies the transformation under Buzov and his name is chanted around the main stand of Vukovar's modest Stadion Borovo naselje.

Buzov himself played at amateur level then worked as a players' agent in his free time, just to keep his hand in.

"I knew my limitations as a footballer so I moved into business administration and joined the management board of a bank. I still have many friends who are professional footballers and a wide network of contacts.

"I went to South America, to the Under-23 pre-Olympic tournament in Colombia, and also took in a few games in Argentina."

Buzov regularly crosses Europe to assess young talent coming through the ranks in Germany, the Netherlands and other big leagues. "Germany's Under-19 Bundesliga has several regional divisions. Where do those hundreds of young players go if they don't make it into the first team at Mainz or Augsburg? The right one can come to Vukovar, where he won't be distracted by wild nightlife or luxury restaurants, focus on his

Symbolic...the Vukovar water tower still stands as a relic of the conflict

Talismanic No.10... Colombian playmaker Robin Gonzalez
Photo credit: Mb Creative Media

football, work hard and make that step up."

Not only that, but Buzov is sympathetic to the experience of being a foreigner in a strange land, as his parents had to do when they came to Germany for work half a century ago. "You really appreciate being given a helping hand," is how he remembers it.

Croatia's amazing success on the global stage, accompanied by fans exhorting: "Vukovar, Vukovar!" at World Cups and European Championship finals, also plays into Buzov's game plan. "Nearly every season, Dinamo Zagreb will sell someone for big money to a major league. Josko Gvardiol going to Manchester City [via RB Leipzig], for example. Scouts will be at every match. It's the ideal shop window for a player to shine, and Vukovar is the perfect springboard for them to go up an extra level."

For Vukovar's Keyendrah Simmonds, any such journey would complete the circle. Having started out at Manchester City's academy, Simmonds came to Croatia via Birmingham City. The Manchester-born striker was all smiles after a recent league win: "I'm really enjoying my football here," said the former England Under-18 international. "All we need now is promotion!"

In order to play Dinamo, Hajduk Split and Rijeka next season, the Danubian club will need to extend its recent run of good form heading into the business end of the campaign.

Buzov's own journey ensures that there's more to his methods than cold financial calculation. Here, on the banks of the Danube, with Serbia just the other side of the river, currents still run deep. As well as putting together a motivated team under

> "I have a very personal relationship with Vukovar. My parents were from Vukovar. My wife was only four years old when she and her family lived through the whole siege"
>
> **HNK Vukovar 1991 owner Markus Buzov**

Stadion Borovo naselje...the entrance to the ground

"Really enjoying my football here"...Keyendrah Simmonds is all smiles *Photo credit: Mb Creative Media*

an ambitious young coach in former Eintracht Frankfurt centre-back Gordon Schildenfeld, Buzov is building for the long term, creating an infrastructure around the club.

"A couple of years ago we signed an agreement with the City of Vukovar to take over 70,000 square metres of land, where we plan to build a training centre and academy," Buzov explains. "Since last November, we have been a joint stock company, which will allow us to attract investors. We now have a proper fan store, right in town, stocking quality merchandise which we sell to Croatians around the world through our web shop."

While bringing Western business practices to a once ravaged corner of the Balkans, Buzov is conscience of not alienating the community his parents once called home. "Playing for Vukovar carries a huge significance in Croatia. When Robin Gonzalez flies home during the winter break, he wears his jacket with the club's name on the back. As he passes through Zagreb Airport, complete strangers shake his hand and pat him on the back."

Every November 18, on the anniversary of Serbia's pyrrhic victory over a ruined city – one that would become part of a newly-independent Croatia in the post-war settlement – solemn music plays on state radio. Here in Vukovar, a march through the city honours the victims.

"Everyone at the club puts on their HNK Vukovar 1991 jacket and joins the thousands of citizens on the slow walk from the hospital to the cemetery. We also take part in other events, to show that we're giving something back to the city.

"I always say to my players, wherever we go, be respectful. Many came from all over Croatia to defend Vukovar back in 1991. If we sleep over at a hotel somewhere in Dalmatia, maybe a waiter or a cleaner who is working there has a father who fought in Vukovar. Show them respect. Everyone in Croatia looks at us with different eyes."

The stadium and its surroundings also enhance Vukovar's reputation. Due for expansion and improvement as the club develops, Borovo naselje is named

> "It's the ideal shop window for a player to shine, and Vukovar is the perfect springboard for them to go up an extra level"
>
> **Buzov on Vukovar being a perfect club for young talent to flourish**

Ambitious head coach...Gordon Schildenfeld watches his side *Photo credit: Mb Creative Media*

"Remember Vukovar"...Croatia fans hold a banner at Wembley on the 27th anniversary of the Battle of Vukovar

after the neighbouring complex established in 1931 by Tomas Bata. A proponent of employee welfare, the Czech footwear pioneer built factory communities across Europe, including Borovo just outside Vukovar.

Borovo naselje became integral to Vukovar's revival by re-establishing the brand of training shoe popular across Yugoslavia in the 1980s, Startas. Every major Croatian town has a Borovo store, the colourful trainers on its shelves hand-stitched right here in Vukovar. The two names are synonymous.

With a major film festival and a pretty riverside cycle trail integral to the pan-European EuroVelo network, Vukovar is emerging from its painfully slow recovery to become a top tourist destination in its own right. A top-flight football club with a strong German connection and solid financial foundations would be a further plus.

"Success is when other people recognise your work," concludes Buzov. "There can be success on the pitch, but there's also what goes on around it. Without wishing to denigrate the people who were here before me, as the economic situation really wasn't easy, when I took over, there were only 60 kids at the youth academy. Now we have 220, as well as a women's team. Locals walk around town with Vukovar shirts on. This name has so much potential."

Vukovar Boys...fans inside the Stadion Borovo naselje
Photo credit: Mb Creative Media

eyewitness

Emanuele Giulianelli reports

AZERBAIJAN

Araz dreaming of returning home

In the heart of the South Caucasus, nestled between Armenia, Turkey and Iran, lies the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. Covering an area of 5,500km squared, the region became an exclave separated from mainland Azerbaijan after the Soviet occupation of the South Caucasus in 1920. It represents about six per cent of Azerbaijan's territory and is home to just under half a million people.

Following Azerbaijan's victory in the most recent conflict with Armenia, the Zangezur Corridor project has regained urgency. This stretch of Armenian land – approximately 30km wide – separates Azerbaijan from its exclave. Baku has long demanded the corridor's opening to end the exclave's isolation, as this was one of the conditions included in the 2020 ceasefire agreement with Yerevan. Currently, the only land connections to Nakhchivan pass through Iran or Turkey.

Nakhchivan has a history dating back thousands of years. According to legend, Noah found refuge here after the Great Flood, and his mausoleum remains one of the city's most visited landmarks. The name itself derives from *nakhch* (descent) and *avan* (place), meaning "the place of descent," referring to the Ark's landing from nearby Mount Ararat. This land has been a cradle of ancient civilizations, from the Medes to the Achaemenids, from the Seljuks to the Russian Tsars.

During the collapse of the Soviet Union, Nakhchivan was the first region in the former USSR to declare independence. However, just a few months later, it was incorporated into Azerbaijan, amid the raging war over Nagorno-Karabakh. In those years, the region experienced near-total isolation – sealed off on all sides and forced to survive on its own. This marked the beginning of a spirit of resilience, survival and pride. The small autonomous republic managed to maintain its own cultural, administrative and even economic identity.

Little known to tourists, Nakhchivan is one of the hidden gems of the Caucasus. The region boasts over 200 mineral springs, accounting for 60 per cent of Azerbaijan's therapeutic water resources. People from across the country and neighbouring Turkey come to heal in these waters, and the city is seeing the slow but steady rise of health tourism. The territory is also rich in salt, with the Duzdag salt caves used to treat respiratory conditions.

Football in Nakhchivan has its roots in Soviet times. Back then, the city's team was simply called Araz after the river that marks the border. It competed in republican-level championships, with mixed results but a strong local identity. After the Soviet Union's fall, the team vanished from professional football, a victim of the region's logistical and political hardships. But now, it has been revived.

"The old Araz was in Nakhchivan," recalls Azerbaijani journalist Kenan Mastaliyev. "This is Araz-Nakhchivan, from the same city, but with a new vision."

The rebirth began under the guidance of Zaur Akhundov, a businessman with interests in oil and construction, and former president of another Azerbaijani club, Kesla (now Shamakhi). A central figure in regional football – he is president of the Nakhchivan Football Federation – Akhundov decided to relaunch the ▸

Top scorer...Araz's Brazilian forward Felipe Santos celebrates

Zangezur Corridor...the proposed link between the exclave of Nakhchivan and mainland Azerbaijan

team with a structured and ambitious project, though not officially of the club, which is formally led instead by his brother Ramin.

"He was always the real president, even back when he was at Kesla," says Gianni De Biasi, former head coach of the Azerbaijan national team. "I don't know the brother, but the one truly in charge is Zaur. He knows football – you can hear him from the stands calling out substitutions and tactics like a coach."

Akhundov took the name of the historic local team and reincarnated it in an ambitious project, adding "Nakhchivan" after the hyphen to reflect the aspiration of representing an entire region. The goal is to build a club that can one day compete with Azerbaijan's dominant club, Qarabag. For now, the team plays and trains in the country's capital Baku, as Nakhchivan's stadium does not meet top-flight standards.

"Araz is a club building its own story in the country," explains Felipe Santos, a Brazilian forward who joined the club from Hapoel Haifa in 2024. "It has only played in the top division for three years, and season after season the team is growing with the aim of becoming one of Azerbaijan's most important clubs.

"The club is currently based in Baku. We train at the technical centre used by youth national teams. Facilities must improve a lot if we want to establish ourselves in the national football scene. But the club grows stronger every year.

"The city of Nakhchivan can't wait to finally host our games. It's the third-largest city in Azerbaijan and, if we played there, we'd definitely get massive support from the locals."

The dream, in short, is to go home: to play, train and live in Nakhchivan.

"I've never been there," the Brazilian admits. "And for our people, it's nearly impossible to come see us."

The Zangezur Corridor, a project that would connect Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan through a narrow strip of Armenian land, is at the heart of peace negotiations. If built, it would not only make the team's return easier, but also serve as a tangible and symbolic link between centre and periphery. The construction timelines, however, remain unclear.

"If the Zangezur Corridor were completed this year, Araz could return home and the stadium problem would be solved within a year," says Mastaliyev. "Otherwise, it'll take more time.

"The problem is purely political. At the moment, Azerbaijan has no road or rail connection to Nakhchivan. Only by plane."

Given current infrastructure, it's hard to imagine a professional team being based there any time soon. "It's tough even for other teams to travel to Nakhchivan. That's why it's easier to stay in Baku," adds Mastaliyev.

> "If the Zangezur Corridor were completed this year, Araz could return home and the stadium problem would be solved within a year"
>
> **Azerbaijani journalist Kenan Mastaliyev**

The situation inevitably recalls Qarabag, the club from the ghost city of Agdam, forced to play away from home for over 30 years after its destruction by Armenian forces during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Qarabag became a symbol of the dream of return – a footballing and national epic. When Agdam finally returned to Azerbaijani control after the 2020 conflict, the club took on even greater significance. Its European successes have brought attention to an entire cause, making football a tool of memory and identity. Araz now represents more than just an emerging club. It symbolises an isolated area asking to be heard, connected, represented. A project that aims to

Araz-Nakhchivan... the players line up before an Azerbaijan Premier League match

reduce the gap between periphery and centre.

"In football, anything can happen," says Felipe Santos. "But to reach Qarabag's level, you need years of investment. Qarabag didn't become strong in a year – it took decades."

De Biasi agrees: "Eventually, they might compete for the title. But it won't be easy, given Qarabag's dominance. Still, for now, playing in Baku helps – it's easier to attract good players when you're effectively a capital-city team."

Next season, the Azerbaijan Premier League, the country's top division, will expand from ten teams to 12: "The increase is a positive development," Araz's club owner told local media. "I hope the new Premier League clubs come from the regions. The format is still unclear, but football should embrace all of Azerbaijan, not just Baku and Absheron. There's so much talent in the regions just waiting to be discovered. I fully support this expansion."

Empty stadiums...due to predominantly attracting only Nakhchivan natives living in Baku to their "home" games, Araz-Nakhchivan do not attract big crowds to Baku's Dalga Arena

Meanwhile, as the future of the region and the team remains uncertain, Araz-Nakhchivan sit third in the league table, with a shot at second place – but still behind the perennial winners Qarabag.

For now, Araz remains an idea on a journey, a team in exile. But in Nakhchivan, people are waiting – certain that sooner or later, the ball will bounce back to where it all began.

GAME CHANGER

Brighton star Yankuba Minteh has helped to change the face of football in The Gambia

Words: Bence Bocsak

Hidden away in West Africa, you'd struggle to find The Gambia on the map. It's a small, narrow strip wedged in the middle of Senegal that has always been a footballing minnow. Generations have grown up without seeing a career in the game as a viable option, with the country failing to qualify for major tournaments and languishing in the bottom reaches of FIFA's world rankings.

But The Gambia's footballing landscape is starting to change thanks to the trailblazing path that Brighton & Hove Albion star Yankuba Minteh has paved in recent years – a path that began at Steve Biko FC.

Growing up on the streets of Bakoteh, a district in Serekunda, the largest city in the country, Minteh had always dreamt of becoming a professional footballer. Coming from a deprived neighbourhood, he spent most of his time playing on the streets, honing his craft and very much shaping the foundations of his future.

It's a future that at the time very few people had tangible faith in, including his family. As a boy, Minteh would tell his mother about his dreams of becoming a footballer and earning enough money to change the family's fortunes, and she would laugh at him and tell him to "stop joking."

But Minteh was determined, and it was not long before his massive talent would be recognised by Steve Biko FC, a club based in Bakau – the next town over from Serekunda.

One of the oldest clubs in the country, Steve Biko FC is named after the South African freedom fighter who was murdered by the Apartheid regime. In 1978, a year after Biko's death, the players of Bakau 11 decided to honour his legacy by changing their club name. In the decades since, the club has built a legacy of its own.

Mamou Swaneh, Steve Biko FC's communications director, believes the club is like a footballing version of eco-tourism, where the focus is on giving back to the community: "In the area of sports, I can say for more than 30 years Biko has been built on that same structure," he tells *World Soccer*. "It's a community-owned club, and our focus is grooming the local talents from the community."

Steve Biko FC have produced some of the best talents in the country over the last few decades, but often the work they have done has gone unnoticed because of The Gambia's lack of success – and exposure – at international level; for much of the nation's history, football wasn't taken seriously. Those perceptions have only started to change in the last decade.

In 2007, the Under-20 team qualified for the World Cup in Canada, which proved to be a watershed moment. It was the first tournament that The Gambia had reached at any level and it ended ▶

Gambian hero... Minteh in action at last year's Africa Cup of Nations

up being an emphatic success. The country's young stars defeated New Zealand and Portugal en route to the last 16, where they lost to Austria.

Minteh was only three years old at the time, but the influence of that 2007 team would have a profound impact on him and his compatriots. Seven of the 21-man squad went on to become full internationals but, more importantly, their success brought scouts from abroad to The Gambia.

In the subsequent years, Minteh could watch the likes of Modou Barrow playing for Swansea City in the Premier League – the first Gambian international to do so – Musa Barrow and Omar Colley become regular stars in Serie A, and The Gambia qualify for their first-ever Africa Cup of Nations in 2021, where they would go on to reach the quarter-finals. All of this gave him the belief that he could follow in their footsteps, and Steve Biko FC gave him the pathway to do it.

Minteh was spotted playing on the streets by the club's scouts and was quickly integrated into Steve Biko FC's first team, initially playing in the second division of The Gambia. During his debut season in the first team, he earned the moniker "The Gambian Messi" for his mesmerising skills on the pitch.

"He was like torrential rain. When he took on defenders, they were scared to face him," Swaneh recalls. "We called him 'Messi' and he gave defenders nightmares."

European pedigree ...Minteh scores for Feyenoord v Celtic in last season's UEFA Champions League

European clubs soon started to take notice of his talent, with agent Bakary Bojang organising a trial for him in Denmark at Odense Boldklub. The first trial, though, didn't go according to plan.

"Yankuba came to a trial twice before we signed him. The first time

Brighton star... Minteh celebrates opening the scoring at Old Trafford

in June 2021 he came for a month," explains Ivan Poulsen, the coach of Odense's Under-19s. "Yankuba was a very fast player, rapidly fast. But after the first time we still doubted if he was good enough for our environment."

During his return to The Gambia, Steve Biko FC provided a supporting pillar and helped Minteh overcome the setback.

"We have a very close team bond between players, coaches and the executive because we are a community club," Swaneh says. "In The Gambia, we have what we call 'joking relationships.' Basically, it's like you could tell something to someone, and they will not be offended, they will laugh it off. That joking relationship has been fused into our football system, which helps to bring a bond between us, and it helps us get through difficult times."

During Minteh's setback, the club was there to put a shoulder around him and to work on the feedback he was given. He bounced back quickly: on his return to Odense, he blew away the club's scouts.

"After the second period, Minteh was the best player for us, and we decided to sign him," Poulsen recalls.

As soon as Minteh signed for Odense, it didn't take him long to showcase his outstanding quality.

"He was very determined to get to the first team," Poulsen says. "After the first match in the Under-19 league, he scored within 37 minutes with a first-time shot. Then in the second match, he scored against Brondby away.

"It was an incredible goal. He scored in a counter-attack where he got the ball midway in our own half and he ran like Messi and Maradona past the whole Brondby team dominating them."

Odense promoted Minteh to the first team after just two games for the Under-19s. He scored on his senior debut and within just a handful of games had attracted the attention of scouts from some of Europe's biggest clubs.

Newcastle United won the race for his signature in 2023, but Brighton is where he has made his mark in the Premier League. The Seagulls signed him last summer following a successful loan spell under Arne Slot at Feyenoord.

He hasn't looked back since. He was nominated for February's Player of the Month award alongside the likes of Mo Salah, and has quickly become one of Brighton's most important players, scoring against Tottenham Hotspur, Chelsea and Manchester United.

> "People are now starting to send their kids to us because they want to be the next Minteh"
>
> **Mamou Swaneh, Steve Biko FC communications director**

Still, he has remained humble and has very much kept his feet on the ground.

"I remember after signing with Newcastle he came back to The Gambia, and there was a friendly game between our first team and the executive team," Swaneh recalls. "He came to the ground and then joined his colleagues to play.

"Everybody stood up to say how much they appreciated that because in other words, if it is a different person, he could be like: 'My standard is too high for this, I am now a Premier League player. Why would I go back to this Sunday football pitch to play?' But not him. He was there with his former team-mates and having fun as if nothing had changed."

For Gambians, Minteh has become an inspiration.

"Minteh has broken the tradition of people saying: 'If you're a footballer, you can't make money.' People used to believe that maybe you would do it for two or three years and then you would end up being a security officer, a plumber or something, you wouldn't have a good job, or you would even be jobless and homeless," Swaneh says. "But that has changed, and people are now starting to send their kids to us because they want to be the next Minteh."

As Minteh leads a new generation of young Gambian stars, there are other Steve Biko FC academy graduates following in his footsteps.

The club have high hopes for strikers Adama Bojang, who scored twice at the last Under-20 World Cup for a Gambian side that echoed the class of 2007 by reaching the last 16, and Lamin Sillah. Both followed Minteh in moving to Europe, joining Reims and Olympiacos respectively, and will continue to fly the flag for both the club and country that produced them.

"We have some very exciting young players," Swaneh concludes. "Our goal is to continue to be sustainable and to continue to produce players who represent us in Europe and at the highest stages of the national team."

BELOW: Return ...Minteh shows respect after scoring against his former club Newcastle in the FA Cup

AFCON...The Gambia made only their second-ever appearance at the Africa Cup of Nations last year

"Something special about him"...Philip Otele is realising his full potential at Basel
Credit: Alamy

FROM SUNDAY LEAGUE TO SUPER LEAGUE

How a Nigerian winger rose from grassroots football in England to the biggest club in Switzerland

Words: Jamie Evans

To describe Philip Otele's career path as unconventional would be an understatement to say the least.

Between 2017 and 2019, the Nigerian was playing football three times a week: on Wednesdays for Teesside University, on Saturdays for Wolviston FC in the 11th tier of English football, and in the Stockton Sunday League for JFC United.

Fast-forward six years and he is playing for the most successful team in Switzerland's modern era and pursuing a Super League title, the latest milestone in a journey that has taken in stops in Lithuania, Romania and the United Arab Emirates.

When it is put to him that, during his time in England, he must have been running rings around players whose football careers will have peaked on those bobbly northeast pitches, he shrugs. "I don't like to put it like that," he tells *World Soccer* with an embarrassed smile.

Yet for those who were there to witness him in action, the 26-year-old's modesty is entirely misplaced.

"I've been associated with Wolviston Football Club for the last 56 years. During my time, I have seen thousands of players come and go, but from the moment Philip Otele signed I knew we had a special talent on our hands," says Keith Simpson, the president of Wolviston FC.

Born in Port Harcourt, in the south of Nigeria, Otele moved to Middlesbrough in September 2017 to study sports marketing at Teesside University. But his focus was always elsewhere: "To be honest, I always wanted to play football," he admits. "I was just doing the university for my family – everyone has a degree [in my family]."

It was while on trial for the university team that he came to the attention of Junior Masandi, a master's student and player for Wolviston.

"It didn't take long to realise there was something special about him," says Masandi of Otele. "Phil had this aura about him – the way he dribbled, the way he struck the ball, his vision for the perfect pass. He played at a level above everyone else, and it was mesmerising to watch."

For a player that had never had trials with an academy, had been overlooked by Nigeria's youth teams, and arrived in England having only played in the street and for his school team, Otele's self-belief was remarkable.

"I don't want to sound like I can see the future, but I always knew I would have an opportunity one day," he says. "Even when I was playing in uni, people always thought I was professional already. I just knew I would have one opportunity. And when it came, I took it."

His strategy was simple: work hard, play as much football as possible and wait for his chance.

"After we started playing together, he wanted to improve his fitness, so he asked if we could train together," recalls Masandi. "The only time I could manage was 5am due to work commitments. At 4.30am, Phil would already be calling me to make sure I was awake.

"I'd pick him up, and we'd head to Albert Park in Middlesbrough for cardio, ball work, everything. That kind of dedication set him apart."

Off the pitch, Simpson describes him as: "a shy, unassuming young man who was extremely polite and who had a massive belief in his own talent." On the pitch, he had "lightning speed, very fast talented feet, and a stepover that Cristiano Ronaldo would have been proud of."

Unsurprisingly, the Wearside League First Division, where Wolviston ply their trade, is not an environment where such ability is lightly tolerated by tough-tackling defenders. "His speed caused him to be consistently fouled but he never retaliated. He would just pick himself up and get

on with the game," adds Simpson.

Certainly, playing at that level helped Otele to toughen up. "It was a good learning curve for me," he says.

In his first season with Wolviston, Otele scored 12 goals in 25 games from midfield. After being pushed forward into the attack the following season, his form took off, scoring 23 goals in 20 games, followed by 21 in 20 in his third season.

"Most teams simply couldn't handle his pace and power," says Masandi. "He even started drawing crowds just to watch him play – he was that exciting."

Professional clubs soon began to circle. Middlesbrough, Lincoln City, Gillingham and Hartlepool United all took a keen interest, and there was talk of a trial at Sunderland. But paperwork scuppered any potential move.

"There were some complications. They said they wouldn't be able to sign me professionally because I was on a student visa," Otele explains.

Award-winning...Philip Otele (R) and Junior Masandi (L) collect individual honours from their time together at Wolviston FC

With a move to an English club ruled out, Otele had to look further afield. In February 2019, he went on a two-week trial with Lithuanian club Kauno Zalgiris. He was offered a contract right away, but he was determined to complete his degree first. After graduating, he moved to Kaunas to take his first steps as a professional.

"It was much harder," he says of the move. "Obviously it's professional football, so the fitness levels that you have to have is a big difference. I needed a place to adapt and get my fitness, tactical awareness – I needed a place where I could learn."

In each of Otele's three seasons, Kauno Zalgiris played Europa League qualifiers. A rewarding experience, but also a reminder of how much further he had to climb. He scored his first European goal in a 6-1 defeat to

Basel stars...Otele celebrates a goal with his new team-mate Xherdan Shaqiri
Credit: Alamy

Norwegian side Bodo/Glimt, and played all but six minutes of another thrashing at the hands of Welsh champions The New Saints. "They gave us a whooping!" he says of his team's 10-1 aggregate defeat to the latter.

At the end of 2021, with ten league goals to his name and his contract coming to an end, Otele began looking at his next move. In January 2022, he signed for Romanian side UTA Arad.

Drawn to Romania by the bigger stadiums and passionate fanbases, he quickly adapted to his new surroundings. After joining, Otele scored five goals in the second half of the season to help the club survive relegation. Ultimately, he only spent a short time there, yet looks back on his 18 months in western Romania extremely fondly.

Arad is a good city the fans, the stadium, everything was amazing I had a really good time there. I saw them as my family. When I knew it was my last game, it was emotional."

The opportunity to join CFR Cluj in the summer of 2023, however, was too good to turn down. Champions in 2021-22 and preparing to compete in Conference League qualifiers, this was Otele's chance to play in a team that was competing at the top of the league rather than scrapping to stay in it.

"It was a good opportunity. I had other teams lurking, but I chose to go to Cluj because they have that European pedigree, and I just wanted to prove myself more in the league."

In 2023-24, he scored 18 league goals, putting him joint-top of the scoring charts with Romania international winger Florinel Coman, as Cluj missed out on the title by just three points to FCSB.

"I had to work harder. I played my best football there, my team-mates were really good and the coaches I worked under helped me."

> "I just knew I would have one opportunity. And when it came, I took it"
>
> Philip Otele

Once again, bigger clubs came calling. Brighton were close to agreeing a deal that would have seen Otele join their sister club Union Saint-Gilloise on loan, but it fell through. Basel were in serious talks as well, but that move would have to wait a few months.

In the meantime, he joined Al Wahda in the UAE Pro League.

A return of zero goals in ten league appearances tells its own story. Otele struggled to adapt to the conditions in Abu Dhabi, where temperatures could often exceed 40 degrees Celsius. With time, he believes he would have adjusted, but when Basel came back in for him, he grabbed his chance. In January, he joined the club on loan until the end of the season with a permanent option included.

It has been a remarkable journey, but one that Otele has taken entirely in his stride. When asked if he finds it surreal to now be playing alongside players like former Liverpool, Bayern Munich and Inter winger Xherdan Shaqiri in a stadium like St Jakob-Park, when just a few years ago he was playing alongside amateurs in parks around the northeast of England, he reverts back to that shrug and humble grin. "Sometimes I think about it. I wouldn't say it's strange. I'm just grateful that I'm here now."

He settled instantly, scoring on his debut, and now has his sights set on winning honours with a club that has been transformed by the returning Shaqiri. Last season, Basel almost slipped into relegation trouble. Now, they are back where they belong: battling for the title.

"He [Shaqiri] sets the standards high in training and in games. You have to learn from a player like that. It's an amazing feeling to play with him. His career speaks for itself.

"I'm optimistic. The group is optimistic. We want to end the season with silverware."

For his old team-mate, Otele's success is no surprise at all.

"Phil is ridiculously talented, incredibly driven, and always knew what he wanted," says Masandi. "Playing at Basel is a huge step forward for him, and I truly believe he's edging closer to the Premier League.

"He has the ability, the work ethic, and the mindset to succeed at the highest level. I truly believe his moment will come."

Whatever comes next – Champions League football, a Premier League move or a first call-up for Nigeria – Otele is keeping his feet firmly on the ground and sticking to the approach that has carried him this far. "If the opportunity comes then I'll take it," he says with that same shrug. "I'll have to keep working. I just have to keep working."

Breaking through...Otele in action for CFR Cluj

RICHARDS' ROLLERCOASTER RIDE

Omar Richards' colourful career has seen him get defensive tips from Jaap Stam, deputise for Alphonso Davies and win the Europa Conference League

Words: Mark Lomas

Omar Richards can still vividly remember the moment he was told that Bayern Munich wanted to sign him. Playing for Reading in the Championship in early 2021, the Lewisham-born left-back received a call that would change the course of his career; at the time, he suspected his agent was pulling a friendly prank.

But the offer was a serious one and, although Harry Kane and Eric Dier are now both lining up at the Allianz Arena, four years ago Richards became the first English-born player to complete a transfer to Bayern.

"I didn't believe him at first," Richards reveals to *World Soccer*. "It wasn't until I actually saw the Bayern representatives on a Zoom call that I realised it was real. It felt crazy to me. These are the types of things you dream of when you start playing football, so when the opportunity arose, of course I grabbed it with both hands."

Bayern and their coach Julian Nagelsmann had raided Reading for a player they believed would provide quality cover for first-choice left-back Alphonso Davies. Richards was already an England Under-21 international – making his debut in a team featuring Phil Foden, Marc Guehi and Callum Hudson-Odoi – but the step-up from Reading to Bayern was still a bit of a shock.

"It was a big challenge, mentally, going from the Championship to the Bundesliga and one of the biggest teams in the world. Getting my head around it was the first thing," Richards says. "But I just remember being so excited and ready to accept the challenge. I knew I had worked hard and felt I was good enough."

Richards had already been learning from the best at Reading, with former Manchester United and Netherlands defensive colossus Jaap Stam, the coach who gave him his debut at the Madejski Stadium.

"He taught me a lot, gave me my first big opportunity and he had a lot of interesting ideas about defending," Richards says of Stam. "He was a very physical defender and my physique isn't like that so he helped me to understand how I could use my

Rio Ave standout star ...Richards is enjoying his time in Portugal

Breakthrough... Richards during his first season at Reading

position to affect my opponent."

Having developed under Stam's tutelage, Richards faced a sink-or-swim situation at Bayern. As a football obsessive, who voraciously consumes the game in any way he can off the pitch, Richards was in his element. He flourished at the German giants, taking full advantage of working closely with Bayern's catalogue of stars – including, of course, Alphonso Davies.

"I learned from Alphonso and all the others too. Every day in training was an education – just being around pure quality every day. I also enjoyed being able to show people what I could do as well.

"I had never played at a club where you need to win every game at all costs. The pressures are different when you're playing for a team like Bayern – I had to adapt to that as fast as possible.

"The winning mentality and how to deal with that relentless desire to win, under high pressure – that was the most important thing I took from that season."

Richards highlights the positive role that Joshua Kimmich played in taking the young Englishman "under his wing", while he clicked socially with Jamal Musiala and Joshua Zirkzee in particular. The left-back played 17 games across the season, including Champions League group stage appearances against Benfica, Dynamo Kyiv and Barcelona.

"All of the Champions League

Rio Ave left-back... Richards attempts to block a cross from Sporting's Geny Catamo

nights were special. When the song comes on, it really is something else and, of course, playing Barcelona was a highlight. Winning the German Super Cup almost as soon as I arrived too.

"Bayern are like a winning machine and they don't stop. They don't get tired. They just keep winning."

Four years on, Richards is playing his club football in Portugal with Primeira Liga side Rio Ave. The 27-year-old initially moved to Nottingham Forest in the summer of 2022 but a succession of serious injuries prevented him from making his debut at the City Ground. He went on loan to Olympiacos last season and has been one of Rio Ave's standout performers in 2024-25.

"It has been another good experience for me," Richards reflects. "The city I live in [Vila do Conde] is nice and peaceful so you can really focus on playing and improving. I've got back to doing what I love regularly, and I'm enjoying it.

"It is a competitive league; a lot of the teams can beat each other and a lot of teams have good players. They have some special talents here. The game in Portugal is very tactical as well, so it's a great place to develop that side of your game.

"Obviously that's why a lot of clubs around Europe are now looking at the Portuguese league for players."

Richards is one of three Englishmen in the squad, joined in northern Portugal by fellow loanees Jonathan Panzo and Nelson Abbey – from Forest and Olympiacos respectively. It is a rarity, with compatriots few and far between both on the shores of Portugal and further afield in Europe.

"Honestly, I don't know [why there aren't more English players abroad]," Richards says. "It is probably easier for a lot of English players to stay in League One and League Two and be content. But the type of person I am, I'm a bit of a sponge when it comes to taking information and learning and accepting new challenges.

"I think players are missing out. It feels like I have all this extra equipment for my game and I am just a lot more well-rounded as a player. I might not have that if I had just stayed in England."

Had he remained in his homeland, Richards would have also missed out on another career highlight. Last May, he helped Olympiacos win their maiden continental title as the 48-time Greek champions triumphed in the Europa Conference League, beating Fiorentina 1-0 in the final. For Richards, it was a notably cathartic moment having made it through almost 18 months of injury heartache.

"Bayern are like a winning machine and they don't stop. They don't get tired. They just keep winning"

"It was so good to finally be playing again but it was also a bit scary because you are not sure if your body is actually right yet. As time goes on you can trust yourself more and you feel like you are getting back to your best and the confidence comes back.

"I had to be patient, building up my minutes. Then winning the Conference League at the end was incredible. Especially at that club, with the support they have from those fans. The celebrations were wild – we had a parade through the city. I'll never forget it."

Richards may yet get another taste of European action, with parent club Nottingham Forest surging towards Champions League qualification. He admits his injury-hit time at the City Ground has been "tough", but also feels his experiences have made him "mentally stronger". For now, he is focused on life at Rio Ave.

"Forest are doing great and I'm happy for the guys there," Richards says. "Playing in the Premier League has always been one of my dreams so when the injury happened [in 2022-23 pre-season] it was just so difficult.

"Every day I was just thinking: 'As soon as I can get back playing again, I'll appreciate it so much more'. That's what got me through and that's why I am enjoying my football so much now.

"Obviously I love England but right now I can look out my window and see the sun and the sea. We're footballers, but also we're living so it's nice to be able to enjoy these experiences too."

Welcome to Bayern...Richards is unveiled by Bayern Munich's then-sporting director Hasan Salihamidzic

Conference League winner...Richards in action against Aston Villa in last year's semi-final for Olympiacos

Infantino's dream to become reality

FIFA president Gianni Infantino's pet project begins in Miami on June 14

Expansion continues to be the name of the game for FIFA as the Club World Cup takes on a new form, featuring 32 teams from across the globe.

The tournament will now be played every four years in a familiar World Cup format but with clubs instead of national teams, and offers a rare chance for clubs to test themselves against a range of opposition from other continents.

Hosted in the United States, the 2025 Club World Cup will also serve as a warm-up for the 2026 World Cup a year later. FIFA commented that hosting the two tournaments in the same region back-to-back would allow it to "maximise synergies with the delivery of the FIFA World Cup 2026, to the benefit of both tournaments and the development of football in the North American region."

International club competition has long been an area of intrigue. For all the controversy and negativity surrounding this particular tournament, there is inherent historic interest in such international challenges.

For as long as they have been able to travel such distances, clubs that have had the financial backing and inclination to do so have embarked on foreign tours. Eventually, these tours turned into organised tournaments, but planning such competitions on a global scale on a regular basis was difficult.

Several international club tournaments were attempted, but the one that really took hold was the Intercontinental Cup. It pitted the best team from South America against the best from Europe and ran from 1960 until 2004, before being replaced by the FIFA Club World Cup.

Originally this annual competition involved between six and eight teams, with most editions running a short-format knockout competition comprised of seven teams from six confederations (one from each plus a host team). South American and European clubs usually entered at a semi-final stage and, though a handful of Asian and African teams reached the finals, the winners were always European or South American.

The new Club World Cup format is more inclusive and offers more games for all teams involved. It includes continental cup winners from each confederation and numerous other teams based on regional rankings.

> The new Club World Cup format is more inclusive and offers more games for all teams involved…but there are several concerns surrounding the tournament

There are several concerns surrounding the tournament, one of them being its potential to create an imbalance in domestic leagues due to the large sums of money those involved in the Club World Cup will receive.

Player welfare is also a big issue. Additional fixtures in the club season for those playing in the expanded UEFA tournaments and the ever-decreasing amount of rest they get in the summer have placed more strain on players.

Though the Club World Cup is far from the only problem in this regard – we have already seen clubs not involved playing additional post-season and pre-season international games of their own anyway – it is contributing to it.

Another controversy inevitably emerged around multi-club ownership. Given how rife the practice is now, such a global tournament would inevitably lead to teams with the same owner facing each other. 2023 CONCACAF Champions Cup winners Leon fell foul to such a scenario and were removed in March after the issue was raised by Costa Rican side Alajuelense. Leon are owned by Grupo Pachuca, which also owns CF Pachuca, who qualified by winning the 2024 Champions Cup. Leon appealed the decision but, regardless of the outcome, it's a problem that will likely be encountered again at future editions.

There were also disputes around Inter Miami's qualification as the host team. This could have been avoided had the method of host qualification been stipulated in advance, but it wasn't. The feeling among sceptics was that FIFA wanted Lionel Messi involved and waited to see what his Inter

The draw…the teams learned their schedule in Miami in December

FIFA president...Gianni Infantino with the Club World Cup trophy

Miami team won before deciding.

Host spots usually go to the team winning the domestic league in the host nation but, in Major League Soccer, the champions are considered the team that wins the MLS Cup play-offs rather than the team that tops the league table.

Inter Miami topped the overall league table with a record points haul. They were the most consistently good team in the US during 2024 and deserve their spot on merit, but the MLS Cup was won by LA Galaxy, who, as champions, had a case for their own qualification.

Inter Miami's involvement will be one of the intriguing aspects of these finals, especially as teams from the Americas tend to place more weight on the Club World Cup than those from Europe. The likes of Messi, Luis Suarez, Jordi Alba and Sergio Busquets, as well as coach Javier Mascherano, will relish testing themselves against familiar European opposition.

Speaking of which, UEFA has the most qualified teams (12), but Brazil will be the best represented nation, having won all of the last four Copa Libertadores finals, so will have high hopes.

While there are some doubts as to the way that FIFA has handled the tournament's expansion, and plenty of accompanying issues deserve attention, the idea of international club competition is as old as the game itself, and this will take it to a new level. Whether fans are as interested as the clubs and organisers in such a tournament remains to be seen.

SCHEDULE

GROUP A		
June 14	**Al Ahly v Inter Miami**	Hard Rock Stadium, Miami Gardens
June 15	**Palmeiras v Porto**	MetLife Stadium, East Rutherford
June 19	**Palmeiras v Al Ahly**	MetLife Stadium, East Rutherford
June 19	**Inter Miami v Porto**	Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Atlanta
June 23	**Inter Miami v Palmeiras**	Hard Rock Stadium, Miami Gardens
June 23	**Porto v Al Ahly**	MetLife Stadium, East Rutherford
GROUP B		
June 15	**Paris Saint-Germain v Atletico Madrid**	Rose Bowl, Pasadena
June 15	**Botafogo v Seattle Sounders**	Lumen Field, Seattle
June 19	**Seattle Sounders v Atletico Madrid**	Lumen Field, Seattle
June 19	**Paris Saint-Germain v Botafogo**	Rose Bowl, Pasadena
June 23	**Seattle Sounders v Paris Saint-Germain**	Lumen Field, Seattle
June 23	**Atletico Madrid v Botafogo**	Rose Bowl, Pasadena
GROUP C		
June 15	**Bayern Munich v Auckland City**	TQL Stadium, Cincinnati
June 16	**Boca Juniors v Benfica**	Hard Rock Stadium, Miami Gardens
June 20	**Benfica v Auckland City**	Inter&Co Stadium, Orlando
June 20	**Bayern Munich v Boca Juniors**	Hard Rock Stadium, Miami Gardens
June 24	**Auckland City v Boca Juniors**	Geodis Park, Nashville
June 24	**Benfica v Bayern Munich**	Bank of America Stadium, Charlotte
GROUP D		
June 16	**Chelsea v TBC**	Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Atlanta
June 16	**Flamengo v Esperance**	Lincoln Financial Field, Philadelphia
June 20	**Flamengo v Chelsea**	Lincoln Financial Field, Philadelphia
June 20	**TBC v Esperance**	Geodis Park, Nashville
June 24	**TBC v Flamengo**	Camping World Stadium, Orlando
June 24	**Esperance v Chelsea**	Lincoln Financial Field, Philadelphia
GROUP E		
June 17	**River Plate v Urawa Red Diamonds**	Lumen Field, Seattle
June 17	**Monterrey v Internazionale**	Rose Bowl, Pasadena
June 21	**Internazionale v Urawa Red Diamonds**	Lumen Field, Seattle
June 21	**River Plate v Monterrey**	Rose Bowl, Pasadena
June 25	**Internazionale v River Plate**	Lumen Field, Seattle
June 25	**Urawa Red Diamonds v Monterrey**	Rose Bowl, Pasadena
GROUP F		
June 17	**Fluminense v Borussia Dortmund**	MetLife Stadium, East Rutherford
June 17	**Ulsan HD v Mamelodi Sundowns**	Inter&Co Stadium, Orlando
June 21	**Mamelodi Sundowns v B. Dortmund**	TQL Stadium, Cincinnati
June 21	**Fluminense v Ulsan HD**	MetLife Stadium, East Rutherford
June 25	**Borussia Dortmund v Ulsan HD**	TQL Stadium, Cincinnati
June 25	**Mamelodi Sundowns v Fluminense**	Hard Rock Stadium, Miami Gardens
GROUP G		
June 18	**Manchester City v Wydad**	Lincoln Financial Field, Philadelphia
June 18	**Al Ain v Juventus**	Audi Field, Washington, D.C.
June 22	**Juventus v Wydad**	Lincoln Financial Field, Philadelphia
June 22	**Manchester City v Al Ain**	Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Atlanta
June 26	**Juventus v Manchester City**	Camping World Stadium, Orlando
June 26	**Wydad v Al Ain**	Audi Field, Washington, D.C.
GROUP H		
June 18	**Real Madrid v Al Hilal**	Hard Rock Stadium, Miami Gardens
June 18	**Pachuca v Red Bull Salzburg**	TQL Stadium, Cincinnati
June 22	**Real Madrid v Pachuca**	Bank of America Stadium, Charlotte
June 22	**Red Bull Salzburg v Al Hilal**	Audi Field, Washington, D.C.
June 26	**Al Hilal v Pachuca**	Geodis Park, Nashville
June 26	**Red Bull Salzburg v Real Madrid**	Lincoln Financial Field, Philadelphia
ROUND OF 16		
(1) June 28	**Winner Group A v Runner-up Group B**	Lincoln Financial Field, Philadelphia
(2) June 28	**Winner Group C v Runner-up Group D**	Bank of America Stadium, Charlotte
(3) June 29	**Winner Group B v Runner-up Group A**	Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Atlanta
(4) June 29	**Winner Group D v Runner-up Group C**	Hard Rock Stadium, Miami Gardens
(5) June 30	**Winner Group E v Runner-up Group F**	Bank of America Stadium, Charlotte
(6) June 30	**Winner Group G v Runner-up Group H**	Camping World Stadium, Orlando
(7) July 1	**Winner Group H v Runner-up Group G**	Hard Rock Stadium, Miami Gardens
(8) July 1	**Winner Group F v Runner-up Group E**	Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Atlanta
QUARTER-FINALS		
(9) July 4	**Winner Match 5 v Winner Match 6**	Camping World Stadium, Orlando
(10) July 4	**Winner Match 1 v Winner Match 2**	Lincoln Financial Field, Philadelphia
(11) July 5	**Winner Match 3 v Winner Match 4**	Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Atlanta
(12) July 5	**Winner Match 7 v Winner Match 8**	MetLife Stadium, East Rutherford
SEMI-FINALS		
(13) July 8	**Winner Match 9 v Winner Match 10**	MetLife Stadium, East Rutherford
(14) July 9	**Winner Match 11 v Winner Match 12**	MetLife Stadium, East Rutherford
FINAL		
(15) July 13	**Winner Match 13 v Winner Match 14**	MetLife Stadium, East Rutherford

Facetoface

MIGUEL CARDOSO

"It is a privilege to be at the Club World Cup"

The Mamelodi Sundowns head coach looks ahead to the upcoming finals in the United States

You arrived in South Africa in December to take over at Mamelodi Sundowns. What have you made of football in the country?
I'm pretty satisfied with the level I found here in general and I'm highly satisfied with what I found at Sundowns. I found a great spirit that we need to permanently feed so that it keeps going. I think the team can perform better and better, and with time that will happen. The connection has also been very good.

Regarding South African football, the stadiums are good but I'd highlight some things that I think can make it better. I think South African football has wonderful matches, but they can be played on better surfaces. The derby between Kaizer Chiefs and Orlando Pirates – what a spectacle! This game should be sold worldwide. We need to promote South African football internationally. I'm speaking not only about Africa, but about taking it to Europe. Why not? People love football. I said the same thing in Tunisia [where he previously coached Esperance], because the conditions there are much worse. The pitches were horrible, and no one wants to watch football like that. The spectacle should be highlighted, improved, made to flourish.

But you have been critical of the hectic schedule your club has in both domestic action and the African club competitions this season...
I don't think that the national team of South Africa benefits from the schedule, and I also don't think that the teams that are competing internationally in the African club competitions benefit from the schedule that we have. I've made an appeal that next season the championship starts earlier, obviously after being given the time needed to rest after the Club World Cup. But what has happened this season [Sundowns could play as many as 56 games] cannot happen again because we will suffer, for sure, and the number of injuries will increase a lot.

We now manage training sessions in such a way that basically we don't train, we just recover. We've tried to reduce the size of our squad but, because of the schedule, we can't do it. If we do, there will be problems because teams that play with this frequency will have more injuries. We've seen coaches like [Pep] Guardiola talking about trying to cope with a tough calendar.

There are no easy matches in the [South African] league so to rotate players you've got to try to keep them all at the same physical level. But that's not easy to do. What I expect is that the players that are called into the team can perform at their best level, but it has really become a question of taking it match by match and not being able to plan too far in the future.

But have you had time to plan and prepare for the Club World Cup?
The club is working hard in the background and have everything in place. We'll still decide whether we can have friendly matches or not, but I know there will not be a lot of time. We have started scouting our opponents and we have our plans. It is a privilege to be a club that participates at the Club World Cup and it is a big achievement for the club and myself. I'm pleased that after qualifying Esperance to the Club World Cup I have the privilege to come to Sundowns. The players are obviously excited about it. We have a big sense of responsibility.

Sundowns are a team known for their flair and style but you have been criticised for playing dull football in the CAF Champions League. Is that fair?
Champions League matches are for results. I remember last year most of the media criticised performances that Esperance put on yet we reached the final. I never worry about the opinions of others when we know what we're doing. We know how to prepare ourselves for the match, what we need to take inside the pitch, the commitment we need to take and no more.

I've heard that I'm a coach that has a defensive approach. But this is not correct. If you want to succeed in the Champions League, you must be very complete as a team. You can never be naive. As a coach, I've been developing. Maybe in the beginning of my career, I thought I would win against everybody in the same way, but football taught me very quickly that you need to adapt.

Sundowns' star player Themba Zwane has been out all season with a knee injury. Will he make it to the Club World Cup?
Our expectation is that he will recover in time but he will need to play a few games before the tournament. I believe. Let's hope, because it's one thing to make a physical recovery but another thing to perform again. He might be able to train but being able to perform on the pitch requires several more steps. We'll have to prepare him for that but he's working very hard. That's what I'm demanding. Our players work well, giving their best, taking care of their bodies, of their health, of their social life, so that they can cope with a quicker recovery.

Interview by Mark Gleeson

GROUP A

PALMEIRAS

Traditional club of Sao Paulo's Italian community who, after some turbulent times and aided by perhaps the best of Brazil's new stadiums, have been fighting for supremacy in the country with Flamengo and more recently with Botafogo. Won the Copa Libertadores in 2020 and 2021 and the domestic league the next two seasons, but nothing big last year, so there is extra pressure on performances in 2025.

A well-run club, they have been reluctant to reach too far for the chequebook – until now. Centre-forward Vitor Roque is the most expensive signing in the history of Brazilian football, and striker Paulinho and Uruguay playmaker Facundo Torres have also been added. And the Club World Cup will also mark the farewell of Estevao. Can a naturally cautious coach wield this into an effective unit? If so, then Palmeiras might be contenders for the title.

Tim Vickery

▼ ONE TO WATCH

ESTEVAO
Unleashed last year aged 16 and quickly proclaimed the most talented Brazilian since Neymar. Left-footed right-winger of astonishing balance who moves to Chelsea after the finals.

▼ THE COACH

Abel FERREIRA
Portuguese who arrived at Palmeiras in 2020. Has much of the young Mourinho about him – his tactical intelligence, capacity to command loyalty and occasional excesses of temperament.

PORTO

If this competition had been set up almost any other time over the past three decades, Porto would have been confident of making a splash. Unfortunately for the Dragons, the club has plummeted to their lowest ebb in the last 30 years.

Long-serving president Jorge Nuno Pinto da Costa passed away earlier this year, and the celebrated never-say-die Porto identity appears to have departed with him.

It has been a harrowing first season in charge for new club president Andre Villas-Boas. Out of both domestic cups and European competition early on, nowhere near mounting a title challenge, and humiliated twice by arch-rivals Benfica (4-1 defeats home and away), AVB will be glad to see the back of 2024-25.

Porto's goal at the tournament is to try to muster a performance from which fans can glean a ray of optimism for next season.

Tom Kundert

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Rodrigo MORA
Creativity personified. Not only is he already a regular at just 18 years of age, Mora has become the centrepiece around which Porto's offensive game is currently based.

▼ THE COACH

Martin ANSELMI
A left-field choice when Porto changed their coach mid-season, the young Argentine tactician who made his name in Ecuador and Mexico has struggled since crossing the Atlantic.

AL AHLY

The Cairo giants have dominated the club game in Africa for decades, but no more so than in winning the CAF Champions League in four of the past five years. The 2024 title, where they edged Tunisia's Esperance in the final, took their record tally of triumphs to 12. Not all have been overly convincing, at times stuttering through the group stages, but they prove to have an uncanny knack of emerging triumphant.

They can count on an estimated support of around 40 million Egyptians, plus millions more throughout the Arab world. The club was founded in 1907, in an era when access to sport was limited to the colonial elite, and became emblematic of resistance to British rule. They have won a staggering 44 domestic league titles and 39 Egyptian Cups and participated in nine previous editions of the old-style Club World Cup.

Mark Gleeson

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Wessam ABOU ALI
The Danish-born Palestine international forward rattled in 18 goals in 19 Egyptian league games after arriving at Al Ahly midway through the 2023-24 season.

▼ THE COACH

Marcel KOLLER
The 64-year-old Swiss has been at Al Ahly for three seasons, having previously been in charge of Austria, plus Cologne and Bochum in Germany and Basel and Grasshoppers in his home country.

INTER MIAMI

The David Beckham-owned club and its star players will feel they have a point to prove. As the best team from the 2024 Major League Soccer regular season, when they topped the overall table with a record points haul, they will now be looking to test themselves against recent league champions from other regions.

With the star power of Lionel Messi, Sergio Busquets, Jordi Alba and Luis Suarez alongside some talented team-mates, they will fancy their chances. Their group is an intriguing one, and although Miami will be looking to qualify for the knockout stages they will not be favourites to do so. But, with Messi still often proving the difference, anything is possible.

MLS often gets dubbed a retirement league, and the aforementioned stars might fit that billing, but they now get an opportunity to prove they can still mix it with the best.

James Nalton

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Lionel MESSI
Remains among the best players in the world even as his career winds down. The Argentina legend gets to play on club football's world stage once again.

▼ THE COACH

Javier MASCHERANO
With Miami favourites to cruise to another Supporters' Shield, cup competitions will be Mascherano's test, and this will be the biggest of his fledgling managerial career thus far.

GROUP B

PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN

A club that sees itself as a major player on the global football scene, a highly ambitious outfit that likes to think big beyond frontiers and accepted norms, PSG were always going to wholeheartedly espouse the belt and braces reform of the Club World Cup.

PSG president Nasser Al Khelaifi – who is also chairman of the European Club Association (ECA) – recently gave an interview to German newspapers, *Bild* and *Die Welt*, in which he denied that the authorities were ignoring the risks of player burnout.

"This new tournament will only be played every four years and is not the cause of the workload," he said. "Look at the NBA. They play every two days. We want to have a bigger presence in different markets, particularly the United States. The Club World Cup is an excellent opportunity to do that."

Nick Bidwell

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Desire DOUE
"Doué" is the French word for gifted and the 19-year-old left-winger most definitely is that. Has exploded into view this year alongside PSG's other electric attackers.

▼ THE COACH

Luis ENRIQUE
Where are all the Ligue 1 critics who initially thought the former Spain and Barcelona boss would flop at PSG? Thanks to him PSG are now a real team, one of the best around.

ATLETICO MADRID

Due to play in what has already been labelled the "Group of Death", Atletico will be in their element in the United States. Argentine coach Diego Simeone and his warrior-like crew are never more energised and resilient than when facing a major challenge. They fight and scrap from first minute to the last and have applied that maxim throughout the 2024-25 campaign, winning countless games with stoppage-time goals.

Immensely proud of their UEFA Champions League record – appearing in the last 12 editions of the competition and regularly reaching the knockout stages, going out this season in the last 16 after a controversial penalty-shootout defeat to rivals Real Madrid – Atleti now intend to make a global splash. They love the thought that they are USA-bound, while Barcelona, a club with twice the annual budget, stays at home.

Nick Bidwell

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Julian ALVAREZ
On a goalscoring mission since arriving from Manchester City last summer, the Argentina forward has played almost 140 games for club and country in the last two years.

▼ THE COACH

Diego SIMEONE
Closing in on 14 years in charge at the club, winning two league titles and two Europa Leagues, there is no chance of *"El Cholo"* ever losing his competitive intensity and powers of motivation.

BOTAFOGO

The reigning champions of South America and Brazil have enjoyed a sensational renaissance since being acquired by John Textor's Eagle Holdings in 2022. The Rio club are pioneers for Brazil's new business model, but it is still early days. Where will Botafogo fit long-term in Textor's multi-club strategy?

It had been hoped that the team that won the Copa Libertadores in November, beating Atletico Mineiro in the final, would be kept together for the Club World Cup. But two key players have moved on: Argentina playmaker Thiago Almada to Lyon (also owned by Textor) and 2024's star man, winger Luiz Henrique, to Zenit in Russia.

Coach Artur Jorge also bailed out. So there is a key question hanging over the current team as they aim to defend their titles and go far in the Club World Cup: can they keep the momentum going?

Tim Vickery

▼ ONE TO WATCH

IGOR JESUS
A major triumph for Botafogo's scouting department. Came on a free last year from the UAE, and was soon lining up as Brazil's centre-forward. Strong, mobile and set to move soon.

▼ THE COACH

Renato PAIVA
Portuguese coach who spent years in Benfica's youth ranks, won Independiente del Valle's first Ecuadorian league, worked in Mexico, in Brazil with Bahia, and joined Botafogo in late February.

SEATTLE SOUNDERS

The Sounders' 2022 CONCACAF Champions League triumph saw them become the first team from the United States to take part in a Club World Cup. It qualified them for the 2022 edition in Morocco, played in early 2023, and also for this expanded 2025 tournament.

They face a difficult group but are boosted by playing their games on home turf at Lumen Field – a stadium they share with NFL's Seattle Seahawks and NWSL side Seattle Reign.

The Sounders name dates back to 1974 and the NASL, making it one of the oldest in American professional soccer, and an earlier incarnation also featured in an early version of the USL. The MLS club began play in 2009, winning the US Open Cup in their first three seasons. They have long been a flagship US soccer team, so it's fitting they feature in this tournament.

James Nalton

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Albert RUSNAK
The Slovakian Designated Player is a creator and scorer of goals – a threat to any opposition defence on his day. A Manchester City graduate but never played for the club.

▼ THE COACH

Brian SCHMETZER
The 62-year-old Seattle native and former player has coached the team for 16 years combined across spells in the United Soccer League and Major League Soccer.

GROUP C

BAYERN MUNICH

While the world players' union (FIFPRO) and many clubs have criticised the new, expanded competition for adding to an already creaking fixture calendar and putting elite professionals under even more physical strain, the line from the Bavarian behemoth is that they are perfectly happy with the latest addition to their workload. Bayern supervisory board elder statesman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge insists that his club sees the beefed up Club World Cup as a sporting and economic challenge they are only too delighted to embrace.

The prize money – €30m just for participating and a whopping €120m should they emerge victorious – should come in very useful. As Rummenigge points out, the proceeds will fund the recent contract extensions of Joshua Kimmich, Jamal Musiala, Alphonso Davies and Manuel Neuer.

Nick Bidwell

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Thomas MULLER
In the last chapter of a glorious, trophy-laden 25-year stint with Bayern, the iconic former Germany attacking midfielder will be looking to go out with a bang.

▼ THE COACH

Vincent KOMPANY
While the 39-year-old Belgian's predecessor at the Allianz Arena Thomas Tuchel was a volcano waiting to erupt, the former Burnley boss goes about his business with a stately calm.

AUCKLAND CITY

OFC Media via Phototek

Flying the flag for Oceania in this new-look event, the Navy Blues, winners of the OFC Champions League four times in a row from 2022 to 2025, earned the much-prized spot as the confederation's highest-ranked club over the four-season qualifying period.

City, NZ league champions on ten occasions, certainly know the lie of the land in the Club World Cup. Since 2006, they have appeared 11 times in the tournament and even managed to claim a bronze medal in 2014, beating Mexican outfit Cruz Azul in a penalty shootout in the third-place play-off.

No team has participated in more Club World Cups, albeit with warm memories at a premium. In total, they have won just three games and drawn two out of 17 in the competition. Oceania's answer to Real Madrid, with 13 OFC Champions League ribbons.

Nick Bidwell

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Dylan MANICKUM
Classy 32-year-old midfield playmaker. Away from the pitch he not only works on a building site but has also earned 63 caps – and is captain – for New Zealand's futsal team.

▼ THE COACH

Paul POSA
Now in his second stint in charge, Posa, 63, led Auckland City to fifth place at the 2009 edition of the Club World Cup, beating Al Ahli (UAE) and TP Mazembe (DR Congo).

BOCA JUNIORS

Boca have won the Copa Libertadores six times, but not since 2007. They have painful memories of losing the 2018 final to great Buenos Aires rivals River Plate, and forced their way through a succession of penalty shootouts before going down to Fluminense in the 2023 decider.

There is the sense, then, of a great club living more on prestige than on recent achievements – a feeling reinforced when they crashed embarrassingly out of this year's Libertadores in the qualifying rounds.

After that traumatic defeat, it looked as if coach Fernando Gago was on his way out. But with the defence tightened up, the team reacted well to crisis, and form in the league improved. Whether Gago will be able to play his preferred formation of two strikers and a midfield diamond in the Club World Cup is another matter.

Tim Vickery

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Edinson CAVANI
Veteran Uruguayan who came back to South America after 16 years in Europe to fulfil a childhood dream of playing for Boca. Rangy figurehead who remains full of intense energy.

▼ THE COACH

Fernando GAGO
Ex-Boca midfielder who returned to take charge of the club towards the end of last year after working in Mexico (Guadalajara) and having an interesting spell at neighbours Racing.

BENFICA

The first team not named Real Madrid to win the European Cup in 1961, Portugal's biggest club will again attempt to make their mark in an exciting new international tournament.

With World Cup winners Angel Di Maria and Nicolas Otamendi showing no sign of slowing down, Turkey's Kerem Akturkoglu and Orkun Kokcu striking up a fine understanding, and Greece striker Vangelis Pavlidis enjoying a prolific debut season in Lisbon, Benfica could cause a surprise.

The Portuguese side have been handed a tough draw, so much will depend on their glamorous-looking opener when their two Argentines will lock horns with their compatriots Boca, in Miami, Florida. A positive result in the Sunshine State will set them up nicely for Auckland City to follow.

An eminently international club, Benfica will be keen to show they belong in this company.

Tom Kundert

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Angel DI MARIA
Still with an insatiable appetite for the game, the 37-year-old retains most of the qualities that made him one of the world's best footballers this century.

▼ THE COACH

Bruno LAGE
In his second spell at the club, the former Wolves and Botafogo coach has breathed new life into Benfica after a poor start to the campaign led to the dismissal of Roger Schmidt.

GROUP D

FLAMENGO

Brazil's biggest club, the Rio giants finally got the finances right a decade ago before embarking on a spell of sustained success (winning the Libertadores in 2019 and 2022) based on a clear model: sell promises such as Vinicius Junior and Lucas Paqueta and use the proceeds to finance a squad with depth and quality, full of players brought back from Europe.

The current line-up has plenty of options down the wings, but is a little thin in the centre-forward position. Much could depend on Brazil striker Pedro making a full recovery from a serious knee problem sustained last year while on international duty.

A rival head coach in the Copa Libertadores recently described Flamengo as "a European club who happen to be in South America." This is a very important tournament for a club with ambitions to become a global giant.

Tim Vickery

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Giorgian DE ARRASCAETA
Uruguay playmaker who has been the team's creative spark for six years. A delicate talent, ground down at times by an unforgiving calendar, but inspirational on his day.

▼ THE COACH

Filipe LUIS
Ex-Brazil international left-back who retired at Flamengo in 2023, started coaching the youth sides and has looked impressive since taking over the first team late last year.

ESPERANCE

The Tunisian club, founded in 1919, share the record with Egypt's Al Ahly for the most appearances (23) in the group stage of the African Champions League. But the *Sang et Or* (Blood and Gold) have only won the competition four times, all between 1994 and 2019.

Qualification for the Club World Cup came on the basis of their consistent performances in the Champions League over the preceding four seasons, including finishing runners-up to Al Ahly last year. Domestically, they are the giants of the Tunisian club game winning 33 league titles – including seven of the last eight – compared with Club Africain on 13 and Etoile du Sahel on 11.

Although their squad is mainly home-based, they have a sprinkling of other nationalities, with players from Brazil, Algeria, Nigeria, Togo, Ivory Coast, Sweden and South Africa regularly starring for them this campaign.

Mark Gleeson

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Abdramane KONATE
The teenage midfielder cost €500,000 from Ivory Coast club San Pedro and has quickly become a regular in the Esperance line-up.

▼ THE COACH

Maher KANZARI
The former Tunisia midfielder, and coach of the national team's various youth sides, took over in March and is the fifth manager at the club since the start of 2024.

CHELSEA

Make no mistake: the Blues will be taking this tournament very seriously indeed. Owner Todd Boehly, committed to growing the business side of the game, is one of the most fervent advocates of a 32-team Club World Cup and knows that huge financial rewards – Chelsea would bank £97m for going all the way – would be commercially transformative for his club. A hugely influential figure in US sport, who also has a substantial stake in the LA Dodgers baseball franchise and the LA Lakers basketball organisation, Boehly will not want Chelsea to simply turn up Stateside as carefree tourists this summer.

That outlook will inevitably turn the heat up on Blues boss Enzo Maresca, already much criticised by some supporters for encouraging a possession-based approach that often translates as sterile and risk-averse.

Nick Bidwell

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Nicolas JACKSON
After a difficult start to life in England, the Senegal striker has become a key part of the Chelsea project. Indeed, they sorely missed his pace and power during his recent injury absence.

▼ THE COACH

Enzo MARESCA
A Pep Guardiola protégé, who served as the head of Manchester City's Elite Development Squad and later was one of Pep's first-team assistants. Also guided Leicester to promotion in 2023-24.

TEAM TO BE DECIDED

Club Leon originally qualified as the 2023 CONCACAF Champions League winners, but CF Pachuca winning the same tournament in 2024 caused a problem. These two Mexican teams have the same owner, Grupo Pachuca, and multi-club ownership within the tournament is prohibited.

Leon were removed after Costa Rican side LD Alajuelense, who believed they should take Leon's place, raised the issue. Grupo Pachuca appealed to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), which meant the identity of the final CONCACAF qualifier would not be known until shortly before the tournament begins. The plan, were Leon's disqualification upheld, was a play-off between 2023 CONCACAF Champions League runners-up Los Angeles FC and Club America, the highest-ranked team not yet qualified, to decide the replacement.

Alajuelense submitted their case for inclusion to CAS, as tournament rules state that a nation cannot have more than two teams involved unless they qualified by winning the continental cup (i.e. Brazil have four because each of those teams won the Copa Libertadores). Mexico and the United States already have two, and the next highest-ranked team outside of those nations was Alajuelense. The significant prize money of $9.55m for qualification alone meant there was plenty at stake in the courts and on the pitch.

James Nalton

GROUP E

RIVER PLATE

The Buenos Aires giants were the last non-Brazilian club to triumph in the Copa Libertadores, back in 2018 in the middle of Marcelo Gallardo's epic eight-year reign as head coach. Under both him and his successor Martin Demichelis, the club accumulated continental frustrations, and Gallardo's return last August failed to spark the expected immediate upturn in fortunes.

River finished last year's Argentine Primera Division in a disappointing fifth place and have not made the greatest start to 2025. The coach has a deep squad at his disposal, but will go into the Club World Cup facing an important doubt: does he have enough quality to play his preferred expansive style against the calibre of opponents that River will be facing and in the fierce heat of summer in the USA, or will he be forced into a more cautious tactical approach?

Tim Vickery

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Franco MASTANTUONO
This 17-year-old attacking midfielder is being brought along gently in a big squad, but carries hints of the promise of an elegant, unhurried left-footed Zinedine Zidane.

▼ THE COACH

Marcelo GALLARDO
Claimed the Copa Libertadores with River Plate as a player in 1996 and twice as coach, in 2015 and 2018. Dubbed "Napoleon" for his tactics and "doll" for his youthful face.

URAWA RED DIAMONDS

The team from Saitama, just north of Tokyo, have been J. League champions once but have lifted the Asian title three times. They are also famous around the continent for their large, passionate and colourful home support.

Saitama Stadium may be an iconic venue but recent form at home has not been great. Last season the Reds finished 13th in Japan's top flight, failing to qualify for the Asian Champions League, and have started 2025 slowly too.

Urawa tend not to score many but are usually tight at the back and that could help them in a tournament situation, though much depends on their opener against River Plate.

Late last year, Maciej Skorza, the Polish boss who delivered the 2022 Asian title, returned but has yet to deliver a change of fortunes. The key is finding more goals. Brazilian striker Thiago Santana apart, the Reds lack firepower.

John Duerden

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Shusaku NISHIKAWA
The goalkeeper has barely missed a game since 2014 as he approaches 500 appearances. The former Japan international is as steady as they come.

▼ THE COACH

Maciej SKORZA
The 53-year-old left Urawa in December 2023 after Asian success to spend time with his family in Poland. He is now back, but has found it much tougher second time around.

MONTERREY

On paper, Monterrey are the strongest team that Mexico will send to the Club World Cup. With a squad full of Latin American internationals and a contingent of top-level Spanish players in Sergio Ramos, Sergio Canales and Oliver Torres, *Rayados* have one of the most powerful squads from the non-European sides.

However, over the past six months, the team has failed to live up to expectation. In the Liga MX Clausura, they've been a long way from the best sides and were eliminated by MLS outfit Vancouver Whitecaps in the CONCACAF Champions Cup.

Their on-field struggles have revolved around an inability to convert chances. Off the field, there have been serious rumours of locker room issues but, after being paired in a group with River Plate, Urawa Reds and Inter, there is real hope of progression to the knockout stages.

Martin del Palacio Langer

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Sergio RAMOS
Even at 39, the Spanish legend has had a major impact since his arrival and, along with his fellow countryman Canales, remains one of the team's biggest stars.

▼ THE COACH

Martin DEMICHELIS
The ex-Argentina centre-back has kept his job despite heavy criticism from the press and fans due to the team's poor results. The clash against his former club River Plate should prove intriguing.

INTERNAZIONALE

The *Nerazzurri* have enjoyed no small amount of success in inter-continental matchplay, striking gold in the old Intercontinental Cup in 1964 and 1965 and going all the way in the 2010 Club World Cup in the UAE. Historically, Italian clubs have held such competitions in much higher esteem than some of the other big European nations (especially England, the Netherlands and Germany) and the feeling in the Inter camp today is one of excitement.

"We know it's going to be an extremely difficult challenge," says key midfielder Nicolo Barella. "It's coming on the back of a long, taxing season. A lot of different factors will come into play but our objective is to go there and lift the trophy. As our coach [Simone Inzaghi] says, the will-to-win is in the DNA of Inter. We'll be looking to do ourselves and our supporters proud."

Nick Bidwell

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Alessandro BASTONI
Outstanding left-footed centre-back who, because of his comfort on the ball, usually cuts the figure of a midfielder playing in defence.

▼ THE COACH

Simone INZAGHI
A much-revered, highly respected Italian head coach with two distinct sides to his persona: his intense, often frenzied behaviour in the technical area, and innate flair for organisation and strategy.

GROUP F

FLUMINENSE

Founded back in 1902, Fluminense are the grandaddies of Rio football and the traditional club of the Rio elite. But times have been tough since winning their first Libertadores title towards the end of 2023.

It was always a stretch – financial sacrifices were made to chase the crown, and midfielder Andre and centre-back Nino had to be sold soon afterwards. But most of the others remained, and going into 2024 no one imagined that the season would turn into a prolonged battle against relegation. Two coaches have since fallen: Copa-winning Fernando Diniz and Mano Menezes, another ex-Brazil boss.

Unlike the other Brazilian representatives, it is hard to see Fluminense having the resources to compete on equal terms at the Club World Cup, and discussions are afoot to transform the club into a business in order to attract wealthy investors.

Tim Vickery

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Jhon ARIAS
Stocky little Colombia attacking midfielder picked up for a song in 2021 and the side's best player since. Versatile and classy, this is a big tournament for him to gain wider recognition.

▼ THE COACH

Renato GAUCHO
Charismatic figure mostly associated with Porto Alegre's Gremio, but has a history with Fluminense too – both on the field and as coach. Took charge of the club for the seventh time in April.

BORUSSIA DORTMUND

Expect the *Schwarz-Gelben* to come out all guns blazing at the MetLife Stadium and TQL Stadium in New Jersey and Cincinnati for their group-stage clashes. As a consequence of their often woeful performances in the German Bundesliga in 2024-25, many of the team will be fighting for their futures at the Ruhr club and, as they have shown in recent times, they very much prefer marquee knockout action to the run-of-the-mill domestic fare, reserving their best displays for the UEFA Champions League. When they are motivated, Dortmund tend to deliver. If they are not fired up, disaster often ensues.

Hans-Joachim Watzke, BVB chairman, is a fierce advocate of the new-look competition: "It will be a revenue driver. No question. I'm happy to stick up for it. It makes perfect sense. We must not always look at things through our European glasses."

Nick Bidwell

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Serhou GUIRASSY
It's a mystery why some critics attack the Guinea striker for wasteful finishing. A prolific marksman in both Germany and Europe this season, notching 13 in the Champions League.

▼ THE COACH

Niko KOVAC
No one is quite sure whether the former Eintracht Frankfurt, Monaco and Bayern Munich boss – who took charge at the Westfalenstadion in January – is a caretaker or a permanent choice.

ULSAN HD

With three K-League wins in a row and now the dominant power in South Korean football, taking that mantle from Jeonbuk Motors (and a case of a club owned by Hyundai's shipbuilding arm supplanting one owned by Hyundai's car-builders), Ulsan are back at the Club World Cup for a third time.

The two-time Asian champions failed to win a game in 2012 and 2020 and, while they are going well domestically, they struggled in this season's Asian Champions League, losing six out of seven.

The acrimonious departure of coach Hong Myung-bo last summer to take the national team job didn't help, and there is a sense that the Tigers are winning at home without having to be at their best.

There has been something of a generational shift in recent months, with a number of experienced ex-Korean internationals leaving to be replaced by younger blood.

John Duerden

▼ ONE TO WATCH

KIM Young-gwon
The 35-year-old centre-back has enjoyed success in China and Japan and played over 100 times for South Korea. No stranger to tournament football.

▼ THE COACH

KIM Pan-gon
Returned to Korea last summer after spells in charge of the Hong Kong and Malaysia national teams. Respected in Asia, the 56-year-old now has a chance to challenge the world.

MAMELODI SUNDOWNS

The South African club won a single CAF Champions League title back in 2016 but have consistently been contenders since, regularly impressing in the group stage and emerging as one of the favourites for the knockout rounds, only to wilt under the pressure.

Based in Pretoria, they are owned by CAF president Patrice Motsepe, who has handed over reigns as club president to his young son Tlhopie. Mining magnate Motsepe is one of Africa's richest men and has not been shy of investing in players, including several Latin Americans and the best of local talent. The club's financial power has seen them win an unprecedented seven successive South African league titles, breaking all sorts of records in the process.

South Africa's national team, well placed to qualify for the 2026 World Cup, draws heavily from Sundowns' ranks.

Mark Gleeson

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Marcelo ALLENDE
The diminutive 25-year-old attacking midfielder, who has a single cap for Chile, is at the heart of Sundowns' possession-based game. A former Arsenal trialist.

▼ THE COACH

Miguel CARDOSO
The well-travelled 52-year-old from Portugal was hired in December, with Sundowns hoping he can reprise his feat in taking Esperance to the 2024 CAF Champions League final.

GROUP G

MANCHESTER CITY

The Club World Cup winners of 2023 find themselves in unchartered waters after a massively disappointing season. Pep Guardiola now has an extensive rebuild to oversee and this tournament should be a vital part of that process, with new players bedding in and a few Stateside victories to boost morale.

With fixture congestion an obvious issue – the Club World Cup final is on July 13, less than five weeks before the start of the new Premier League campaign – Guardiola will clearly have to tread carefully. For the past 12 months, injuries to key players – most notably Rodri for the majority of the season and more recently Erling Haaland – have decimated his plans, and he is bound to heavily rotate his personnel in America. He will treat the event as a competitive pre-season, a time for rest and relaxation as well as sporting instruction.

Nick Bidwell

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Omar MARMOUSH
The Egypt forward, snapped up from Eintracht Frankfurt in a mid-season £57m move, has been highly impressive with his energy, flair, flexibility and finishing skills.

▼ THE COACH

Pep GUARDIOLA
The Catalan genius is the most successful coach in the history of the Club World Cup, winning it twice with Barcelona and once each at the helm of Bayern Munich and Manchester City.

WYDAD

African Champions League winners in 2021-22, the Moroccan club has since suffered a huge slump. They fell to a sixth-place finish in the domestic league last season, thereby missing out on playing in the 2024-25 African club competitions. That, conversely, could benefit them at the Club World Cup amid an over-cluttered football calendar, but they have also struggled domestically this campaign, losing much of the lustre of only two seasons ago.

Wydad were founded in 1937, with roots in the independence movement, and have claimed a record 22 Moroccan league titles, nine more than the next highest achiever, Casablancan rivals Raja.

They have been to two previous Club World Cup tournaments but failed to win a match in either 2017 or 2022. Having been drawn with giants Juventus and Manchester City, they'll be targeting the match against Al Ain to break their duck.

Mark Gleeson

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Mohamed RAYHI
The former PSV youth product joined Wydad at the start of the season after spells in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and has been Wydad's leading goalscorer this campaign.

▼ THE COACH

Rhulani MOKWENA
The South African, 38, joined at the start of the campaign from Mamelodi Sundowns – where he won the inaugural African Football League in 2023 – but will leave after these finals.

AL AIN

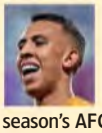
The Asian champions of 2024 have struggled since lifting that trophy. Hernan Crespo led the team from the oasis city to a second continental title in May of last year, but the Argentine was fired in November after a dismal attempt to defend that crown.

His replacement Leonardo Jardim, who led Al Hilal to the 2021 AFC Champions League, came in but lasted just three months. In the end, Al Ain got just two points from eight group games and, at home, the 14-time UAE champions fell out of the title race. In short, they score plenty but the defence could be a lot tighter.

Vladimir Ivic has the latest pair of hands at the helm of what is still a strong squad with a good mix of foreign (mainly South American) and domestic talent. Opening games against Juventus and Manchester City will be extremely tough, but at least the pressure will be off.

John Duerden

▼ ONE TO WATCH



Soufiane RAHIMI
Much depends on the Moroccan forward, who was the top scorer in last season's AFC Champions League as well as the Paris Olympics. Devastating on his day.

▼ THE COACH

Vladimir IVIC
The Serbian has coached Watford, and won the Greek Cup with PAOK and Israeli title with Maccabi Tel Aviv but, after taking over in February, was unable to turn Al Ain's domestic campaign around.

JUVENTUS

Serie A champions nine times in a row between 2012 and 2020, Juve may no longer enjoy that aura of invincibility on the domestic scene yet they remain a magical name in European club football. Twice winners of the Champions League, runners-up on seven occasions and once graced by such world superstars as Paolo Rossi, Michel Platini, Gianluca Vialli, Alessandro Del Piero, Zinedine Zidane and Cristiano Ronaldo, they lifted the old Intercontinental Cup on two occasions, beating Argentinos Juniors in 1985 and River Plate in 1996, both one-off finals in Tokyo.

It was not the most impressive route to this summer's finals, with qualification coming as a result of just two appearances in the Champions League last 16 over the four-year qualification period, but they will welcome the chance to be considered among the global elite.

Nick Bidwell

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Manuel LOCATELLI
Midfield fulcrum, skipper and emotional leader. A gutsy player born to inspire, he selflessly does the dirty work that allows Juve's attackers the freedom to express themselves.

▼ THE COACH

Igor TUDOR
The *Bianconeri* certainly seem to be playing with more conviction and discipline since the former Juve and Croatia centre-back was brought in to replace Thiago Motta in March.

GROUP H

REAL MADRID

No Real powerbroker will be keener for success in the US than coach Carlo Ancelotti, who got himself in a PR pickle last summer when insisting that *Los Blancos* would not be taking part in the new-look Club World Cup.

"FIFA can forget about it," he told the Italian newspaper *Il Giornale*. "A single match for Real Madrid is worth 20 million and FIFA wants to give us the same amount for the entire cup. No way. Like us, other clubs will reject the invitation."

Cue uproar aplenty, not to mention some serious backtracking, with Ancelotti claiming his words were "not interpreted in the way I intended" and Madrid issuing a contrite retraction, saying: "Our club will participate as planned in this competition. We will approach it with pride and the utmost enthusiasm to make our millions of fans dream of a new title."

Nick Bidwell

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Federico VALVERDE
Not all the key men at Real are Oscar winners. The Uruguay midfielder or full-back has that rare ability to bring out the best in others – not to mention his endless energy and stinging shots.

▼ THE COACH

Carlo ANCELOTTI
Following a toothless Champions League exit to Arsenal, rumours are swirling that the Italian mastermind, who has won three Club World Cups as a coach, may soon be saying goodbye to the Bernabeu.

AL HILAL

The most successful club in Saudi Arabia as well as Asia in terms of domestic and continental titles won, Al Hilal fans would say they are the continent's biggest club. Of all the Asian teams, the Blues from Riyadh have genuine ambitions of winning – after all, they did reach the final two years ago, losing 5-3 to Real Madrid.

After setting a new world-record streak of 34 consecutive wins in 2024, the Blues have not been quite as imperious this term. The departure of Neymar is not the reason but the machine has been creaking at times – just three wins from nine league games from mid-February to mid-April is almost unprecedented.

The injury to Serbia striker Aleksandar Mitrovic was more painful, as he was scoring freely before and has looked out of sorts even after his return. Yet there is still enough talent, both domestic and foreign, to shine.

John Duerden

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Salem AL DAWSARI
Not as famous as some others – though all will remember his winning goal against Argentina at Qatar 2022 – but this playmaking talisman makes both club and country tick.

▼ THE COACH

Jorge JESUS
The Portuguese – in his second spell at the club – could do nothing wrong until a few months ago, but some indifferent results and reports of dressing room unrest mean his days may be numbered.

PACHUCA

When the Club World Cup draw was held back in December, Pachuca looked destined to be easy prey for their group rivals. Yet shortly after that glitzy event in Miami, the team changed perceptions with a remarkable performance in the FIFA Intercontinental Cup, knocking out the South American (Palmeiras) and African (Al Ahly) champions, and only losing in the final to Real Madrid.

Following that result, they have had a decent Clausura campaign in Liga MX, where they still have a shot at the title. They'll head into the summer in good spirits.

The turnaround came thanks to the emergence of two homegrown players, Elias Montiel and Bryan Gonzalez, coupled with the quality of foreign signings like Oussama Idrissi, John Kennedy and Salomon Rondon – all under the excellent management of Guillermo Almada. Their direct style and relentless pressure could surprise in the US.

Martin del Palacio Langer

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Elias MONTIEL
Bronze Ball winner at the 2024 FIFA Intercontinental Cup at just 19 years old, the intelligent defensive midfielder will use the Club World Cup as a springboard to European football.

▼ THE COACH

Guillermo ALMADA
The Club World Cup will be the Uruguayan coach's swansong with Pachuca, and he'll leave as one of the most successful managers in the club's history. He will hope to go out on a high.

RED BULL SALZBURG

With all due respect to the Austrians, many will be surprised that they are one of the select group of 12 European sides taking part in the FIFA jamboree. Owing their invitation to an 18th place in UEFA's four-year coefficient rankings, Salzburg have hardly been Euro trailblazers in that period, only reaching the Champions League last 16 once and twice dropping into the Europa League, where they were knocked out straight away on both occasions.

Salzburg's good fortune was that all the sides above them in the UEFA ranking had either qualified as Champions League winners or were from a nation that had already filled its two-club quota, meaning Liverpool, RB Leipzig, Barcelona, Napoli, Sevilla and Milan missed out.

Austrian champions ten years in a row between 2014 and 2023, Salzburg are experts at nurturing young talent – it'll be good to see who's next off the conveyor belt.

Nick Bidwell

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Oscar GLOUKH
The 21-year-old Israeli left-winger, by far Red Bull Salzburg's most creative individual, has a host of Premier League scouts filing complimentary reports.

▼ THE COACH

Thomas LETSCH
The 56-year-old German, previously in charge at Bochum, Vitesse Arnhem and Austria Vienna, has made Salzburg so much harder to beat since his appointment in mid-December.

The view from...

For some, the upcoming FIFA Club World Cup is an unnecessary strain on an already crowded calendar; for others, it is the highlight of the footballing year. Our network of experts from the participating nations offer their views...

AFRICA

There is much excitement and expectation in Africa ahead of the Club World Cup, not least because of the financial guarantees that the continent's four representatives will receive. It was speculated that it could be as much as US$40 million each, but Al Ahly, Esperance, Mamelodi Sundowns and Wydad are guaranteed a more realistic minimum of $9m for participation in the tournament, with the chance to make much more if they win a few matches or progress beyond the group stage. By African standards, this is a major boost to their annual budgets. The most any club can make from the African Champions League is the top annual prize money of $4m, and much of that goes on the eye-watering travel expenses clubs are subjected to when competing across the vast continent.

Mark GLEESON

ASIA

For most clubs in the past, the Club World Cup was seen as a chance to play against a storied European team – that was the target. Al Hilal of Saudi Arabia, though, have been a little different even before the recent spending spree. The Riyadh club beat the African and South American champions in 2022 (played in 2023) and lost 5-3 to Real Madrid in the final. For Urawa Reds and Ulsan HD, the prize money will make a big difference. Now that there are guaranteed games against glamorous opposition, there is more of a conversation about how they can fare in the actual competition.

John DUERDEN

AUSTRIA

Fans of Red Bull Salzburg, the only Austrian club involved, are generally eager to see how their team will fare in the US but are not performing cartwheels of joy either. More important to them is finding the solution to their team's recent drop-off in form both domestically and in the Champions League. They fear – probably correctly – that the Club World Cup will interfere with their preparations for the next campaign. On the whole, Austrian supporters are traditionalists with a very romantic idea of the sport. They love the artistry and the thrills, but increasingly believe there is too much top-level football nowadays.

Nick BIDWELL

ENGLAND

The English attitude towards this competition was best summed up by *ITV* offering £0 to broadcast the games. That was before FIFA's deal with *DAZN*, who have since agreed to show 23 games on *Channel 5*. That could be key, as few fans would have sought out a stream or subscription to watch the finals, but on a free-to-air channel it has a chance of capturing wider attention. For now, it is mostly regarded as a glorified pre-season tournament, with the Women's European Championship more likely to attract headlines.

Jamie EVANS

FRANCE

The domestic campaign may have been concluded early, with Paris Saint-Germain crowned Ligue 1 champions in the first week of April, but with *Les Parisiens* the only French side competing in the Club World Cup, there is indifference towards the competition. The very limited media coverage has been dominated by the subplot of John Textor, the owner of Lyon, and his Botafogo side taking on PSG amid tensions between the American and PSG president Nasser Al Khelaifi.

Luke ENTWISTLE

GERMANY

When it comes to the new-fangled Club World Cup, much of the public mood music across Germany is indifferent if not outright hostile. Most hardcore Bundesliga terrace-dwellers never tire of taking pot-shots at corporate influences on the game and see the latest FIFA wheeze, replete with its $1 billion prize pot, as an unsavoury exercise in balance-sheet doping. According to a survey of German football fans at the end of last year, a good third claimed they had never heard of the Club World Cup, while 45 per cent of the respondents labelled the concept a turn-off.

Nick BIDWELL

ITALY

With Internazionale and Napoli fighting out a tense Serie A finish, not many fans seem much excited by the FIFA Club World Cup. Frankly, the race for the *Scudetto* seems much more important. When the competition actually kicks off on June 14, one suspects that, apart from the fans of Inter and Juventus, the two Italian clubs involved, Italian supporters will pay it little attention. However, if one of these two were to make the final, then that disinterest might suddenly change.

Paddy AGNEW

MEXICO

Since Liga MX stopped participating in the Copa Libertadores in 2017, Mexican clubs aren't used to having the luxury of facing top-class foreign opposition, so the Club World Cup is quite a big deal in Mexico. The country will definitely be tuning in, although there would be even more enthusiasm if one of the traditional top four – America, Guadalajara, Cruz Azul or Pumas UNAM – were taking part. Monterrey have a star-studded squad, but they don't generate anywhere near as much attention as America, the most popular team in Mexico, so the mood could yet be ramped up once Leon's replacement is confirmed.

Martin DEL PALACIO LANGER

NEW ZEALAND

This tournament won't be an absolute must-watch, but it will generate some interest. There is a particular fascination with Auckland City's fate after they were drawn into one of the hardest groups. The amateur club have performed miracles on the world stage before, especially with a third-place finish at the 2014 Club World Cup in Morocco, but facing Bayern Munich, Benfica and Boca Juniors in the space of ten days is a crazy scenario given that most of the squad have regular day jobs. Beyond that, there is curiosity about the various host cities and stadiums after the All Whites recently qualified for next year's 48-team extravaganza.

Mark BURGESS

PORTUGAL

International club competitions are always held in particularly high regard in Portugal, where evaluation of the country's greatest-ever teams is generally restricted to those that have prospered abroad. Although the argument about burnout and too many games does get an airing, the overriding sentiment here is one of excited anticipation. "Benfica and Porto, through their presidents, have let it be known that they will have the greatest pleasure in stepping onto American pitches in June and July, even making the Club World Cup one of their major objectives for 2025," journalist Rui Almeida wrote in *A Bola*. "It is a clear opportunity for the international (re)affirmation of the Eagles and the Dragons."

Tom KUNDERT

SOUTH AMERICA

The idea that "no one cares about the Club World Cup" most emphatically does not apply to South America, where the birth of this type of competition is seen as a dream come true. The quest for world club supremacy has long been close to the South American soul – the continent's Copa Libertadores was created in 1960 with the explicit aim of finding a champion to take on Europe's best – and the continent has been wounded by failing to produce a world club champion since Corinthians in 2012. This tournament is seen as a huge opportunity, both to earn money and have a realistic shot at glory – especially for the Brazilians. The calendar in Brazil has been specially altered, the league shutting down for a month, to give its teams the best chance of success in the United States.

Tim VICKERY

SPAIN

In mid-April, a story emerged claiming that Barcelona had been trying to work out if there was some way that they could wangle a place at the Club World Cup this summer. Not so much because of the competition itself but for the money that goes with it – and that more or less sums up the Spanish view. All the more so after a season when the demands of the football calendar are already seen as a problem that needs urgent attention. By the final in July, the Club World Cup might feel like a big deal, but it doesn't yet. There's too much else going on, and too much of it is more important, to be thinking about the US.

Sid LOWE

USA

Some international clubs have big followings in the United States, but that won't necessarily translate into interest in this tournament. Many in US soccer will focus on how smoothly it runs ahead of 2026. The arrival of well-supported teams will create a buzz, but will fans face problems at the border? Will games be affordable and accessible? Does dynamic ticketing lower prices as well as raise them? It will also fill in some gaps as to where MLS stands globally. Progress for Seattle Sounders and Inter Miami, two flagship MLS sides in their own way, will be a great advert for the league on the world stage.

James NALTON

Gold Cup's battle for soccer spotlight

CONCACAF's premier international tournament will face competition for attention this summer

The 2025 CONCACAF Gold Cup forms part of a summer festival of football in the United States alongside the FIFA Club World Cup. International football for clubs and national teams will be taking place across the country, and also in Canada, with Vancouver set to host Gold Cup matches.

In this scenario, the tournament that decides the best team in CONCACAF risks being overshadowed by FIFA's new toy, which will likely be marketed more intensely and attract more headlines on and off the pitch.

Though international club competition is potentially intriguing – and FIFA has pushed the Club World Cup by offering lucrative prize money in a bid to encourage clubs and media to take it seriously – for now, the Gold Cup remains the more prestigious competition in sporting terms.

As the region's equivalent to the Copa America and European Championship, the Gold Cup should play a prominent role in the build-up to the World Cup, and the winner will take plenty of confidence into 2026.

Four familiar names from the business end of recent tournaments in the region – Mexico, Canada, Panama and the United States – were the highest ranked nations ahead of this Gold Cup and went into pot one at the top of the draw, being placed in separate groups for the four-group, 16-team tournament. The chances are that two of those four will meet in the final, especially as two of Mexico, Panama and the United States have made the final in eight of the last ten editions, dating back to 2005.

On the back of winning this year's Nations League final, the pressure is on defending champions Mexico to cement their status as the best team in CONCACAF.

Meanwhile, this is a big tournament for the United States and Mauricio Pochettino, who will be expected to triumph on home soil. Following their disappointing performance in the Nations League finals – where they finished fourth out of four teams – the USMNT need to prove that they have what it takes to win important, competitive matches.

Canada will be looking to continue their progress under Jesse Marsch and are more than capable of winning, despite only making the final of this competition once, back in 2000.

> The tournament that decides the best team in CONCACAF risks being overshadowed by FIFA's new toy

For Panama, beaten finalists in both the 2025 Nations League and the 2023 Gold Cup, this is all about taking the next step.

2026 World Cup co-hosts...Mexico and Canada will want to make a statement at the regional finals

Jamaica, Costa Rica, and Honduras are the teams most likely to crash the pot one party, while guest side Saudi Arabia also have the potential to cause an upset and will expect to progress from Group D ahead of Haiti and Trinidad & Tobago.

Jamaica are the only team to have interrupted the dominance of the aforementioned trio of final regulars, finishing runners-up in 2015 and 2017. The current Jamaica side under Steve McClaren have the quality to go far and will push Panama hard in Group C, but need to find some consistency.

The involvement of the three upcoming World Cup co-hosts adds an extra edge to this Gold Cup – not just for the teams involved but also for the host countries themselves in terms of logistics and organisation.

As hosts of the 2026 World Cup and automatic qualifiers for that tournament, Canada, Mexico and the United States need to make the most of these competitive games, as they will not have the preparation offered by a World Cup qualifying stage.

Five World Cup venues will be used at this Gold Cup, four of them in the United States – Houston, Arlington, Santa Clara, and Inglewood – plus the one in Vancouver.

While the Gold Cup takes place in central and western regions of the United States and Canada, the Club

Battling for attention... US midfielder Weston McKennie and Panama's Adalberto Carrasquilla compete for the ball

World Cup will be hosted mostly in the eastern and southern states at the same time, barring two west-coast venues in Seattle and Pasedena. The two tournaments together give the feel of a dress rehearsal for the 2026 World Cup, especially for the United States in an organisational sense.

The question of how additional travel restrictions and visa concerns caused by the new US administration under President Trump will affect international sporting events will begin to be answered.

There is already a history of such problems in CONCACAF club and national team tournaments, with teams or players being denied entry to the US at various points in the history of continental competition. These issues are likely to be exacerbated under the new administration, and Haiti could be the most affected as it is on a list of countries subject to a proposed travel ban.

This is the last chance for CONCACAF teams to challenge for a major trophy before the World Cup arrives in the region and, for some, it will be their last chance to play meaningful competitive games before then. It is also a test of the hosts' infrastructure and preparedness to welcome international events and, in that sense, will serve as a prelude to the story of the 2026 World Cup.

SCHEDULE

GROUP A		
June 14	**Mexico v Dominican Republic**	SoFi Stadium, Inglewood
June 15	**Costa Rica v Suriname**	Snapdragon Stadium, San Diego
June 18	**Costa Rica v Dominican Republic**	AT&T Stadium, Arlington
June 18	**Suriname v Mexico**	AT&T Stadium, Arlington
June 22	**Mexico v Costa Rica**	Allegiant Stadium, Paradise
June 22	**Dominican Republic v Suriname**	AT&T Stadium, Arlington
GROUP B		
June 17	**Canada v Honduras**	BC Place, Vancouver
June 17	**Curacao v El Salvador**	PayPal Park, San Jose
June 21	**Curacao v Canada**	Shell Energy Stadium, Houston
June 21	**Honduras v El Salvador**	Shell Energy Stadium, Houston
June 24	**Honduras v Curacao**	PayPal Park, San Jose
June 24	**Canada v El Salvador**	Shell Energy Stadium, Houston
GROUP C		
June 16	**Panama v Guadeloupe**	Dignity Health Sports Park, Carson
June 16	**Jamaica v Guatemala**	Dignity Health Sports Park, Carson
June 20	**Jamaica v Guadeloupe**	PayPal Park, San Jose
June 20	**Guatemala v Panama**	Q2 Stadium, Austin
June 24	**Panama v Jamaica**	Q2 Stadium, Austin
June 24	**Guadeloupe v Guatemala**	Shell Energy Stadium, Houston
GROUP D		
June 15	**United States v Trinidad & Tobago**	PayPal Park, San Jose
June 15	**Haiti v Saudi Arabia**	Snapdragon Stadium, San Diego
June 19	**Trinidad & Tobago v Haiti**	Shell Energy Stadium, Houston
June 19	**Saudi Arabia v United States**	Q2 Stadium, Austin
June 22	**Saudi Arabia v Trinidad & Tobago**	Allegiant Stadium, Paradise
June 22	**United States v Haiti**	AT&T Stadium, Arlington
QUARTER-FINALS		
June 28	**TBC v TBC**	State Farm Stadium, Glendale
June 28	**TBC v TBC**	State Farm Stadium, Glendale
June 29	**TBC v TBC**	US Bank Stadium, Minneapolis
June 29	**TBC v TBC**	US Bank Stadium, Minneapolis
Match-up slots to be confirmed but will be as follows: 1D v 2A, 1A v 2D, 1C v 2B & 1B v 2C		
SEMI-FINALS		
July 2	**TBC v TBC**	Energizer Park, St Louis
July 2	**TBC v TBC**	Levi's Stadium, Santa Clara
Match-up slots to be confirmed but will be as follows: WQF1 v WQF4 & WQF2 v WQF3		
FINAL		
July 6	**TBC v TBC**	NRG Stadium, Houston

Final host...the 72,000-seater NRG Stadium also hosted games at last year's Copa America finals

6 of the best CONCACAF Gold Cup stars

James Nalton picks out the players to watch at this summer's CONCACAF Gold Cup finals

1 Raul JIMENEZ

MEXICO

Having just turned 34, Jimenez is enjoying one of the best seasons of his career, leading the line for a highly impressive Fulham side. This is the Mexican's first season with double figures for goals since his outstanding 2019-20 campaign for Wolverhampton Wanderers, and his best since the sickening head injury that he suffered against Arsenal in November 2020.

At national team level, he was named the best player at the 2025 CONCACAF Nations League finals, scoring a brace in both the semi-final against Canada and in the final against Panama. Santiago Gimenez was expected to be taking Mexico's centre-forward spot by now but, with Gimenez not yet hitting his stride since joining Milan from Feyenoord in January, Jimenez remains the go-to striker for *El Tri* head coach Javier Aguirre.

2 Adalberto CARRASQUILLA

PANAMA

The 26-year-old midfielder is one of the most gifted players in the region, where, for now, he still plies his trade. Having begun his career with hometown club Tauro FC in Panama City, he spent some time in the Spanish second division with Cartagena before rising to prominence in MLS with Houston Dynamo. He was regularly linked with a return to Europe but instead made the move south to Mexico's Liga MX with Pumas UNAM, where he featured in the team's run to the quarter-finals of this year's CONCACAF Champions Cup.

Sometimes referred to by his nickname, "Coco", Carrasquilla – who has over 60 caps – is a tidy midfielder who always wants the ball and has the ability to make things happen from midfield.

3 Leon BAILEY
JAMAICA

Aston Villa have made huge strides in the past few seasons and their skilful, creative winger has remained a part of that progress. While Jamaica have in recent years bolstered their ranks with a number of foreign-born players, Bailey remains their only genuinely top-level talent, the only one competing in the latter stages of the Champions League.

He returned to the Jamaica national team fold under Steve McClaren, and his season with Villa – not too intense but also involved in important games – could be ideal preparation for an international tournament. On his day, Bailey is the best player in CONCACAF.

4 Moise BOMBITO
CANADA

During Bombito's time in MLS with Colorado Rapids, his ability to play at a higher level soon became clear. Were he not snapped up by Ligue 1 side Nice in August 2024, he would likely have been named Defender of the Year at the end of that MLS season. His rise has been swift and, though he's now 25 years old, he's still relatively inexperienced at senior level. He's gone from playing college soccer for New Hampshire Wildcats in 2022 to becoming the standout centre-back in CONCACAF in 2024.

As a Montreal native, he's a natural French speaker, which aided his transition to top-level European football in France. Talent helps too and, like all the best modern defenders, he's strong in duels, pacy enough to operate in a high line, and good on the ball.

5 Diego LUNA
USA

The 21-year-old was one of the few positives from USA's Nations League debacle. A week or so after the finals, USMNT assistant Miguel D'Agostino watched Luna score twice for Real Salt Lake against defending MLS champions LA Galaxy. His recent club form and positive introduction to senior international football, which has been a long time coming despite his youth, should see him named in his country's Gold Cup squad.

He started against Canada in the Nations League third-place play-off, but from the right wing rather than his preferred No.10 role. Many believe that his unique creative skillset make him a better option in that role than the talismanic Christian Pulisic.

Mauricio Pochettino has had a rocky start to life as USMNT boss, but Luna could help his coach steer things back in the right direction.

6 Alonso MARTINEZ
COSTA RICA

When Martinez joined New York City FC from Belgian club Lommel in 2023, the expectation was that he'd be a useful squad player, filling in when necessary, but instead he became one of the most prolific scorers in MLS. Indeed, only Luis Suarez and Lionel Messi scored more MLS goals per 90 minutes than Martinez in 2024, and he's been finding the net regularly in 2025 too.

This has seen him return to the national team fold on a more regular basis and, if he can replicate his club form for Costa Rica, *Los Ticos* could be a big threat.

Bodo/Glimt leader ...Kjetil Knutsen directs operations from the touchline

DEFYING THE ODDS

Norwegian champions Bodo/Glimt owe much of their rise to their manager, Kjetil Knutsen

Words: Sean Cole

Fairy tales are almost non-existent in modern football, where there's such a powerful correlation between the size of a club's expenditure and their results. It's rare for anyone to defy the odds, even briefly, which is what makes the Bodo/Glimt story so compelling. Somehow, they keep doing so.

In recent years, Bodo/Glimt have been transformed from undistinguished also-rans to the pre-eminent force of Norwegian football. Among the many factors responsible, Kjetil Knutsen is the one that unites all others. He was appointed as manager in January 2018, shortly after the club returned to the top division.

Bodo/Glimt are based in the small northern town of Bodo, which has a population of 42,000 and sits just inside the Arctic Circle, where the weather is cold and the nights are long. Incredibly, in the past five seasons, they have won the Eliteserien title four times, having never done so before. "It's like an unrealistic *Football Manager* save!" laughs Vegard Moberg, who was part of that first triumph in 2020.

Now more than just a domestic powerhouse, the club have made giant strides in Europe too, reaching first the quarter-finals of the Conference League in 2021-22 before this season's Europa League run. Porto, Braga, Besiktas, FC Twente, Olympiacos and Lazio are all clubs with far greater European pedigree, and all were beaten by the Arctic minnows in 2024-25.

No Norwegian club had ever reached the last four of a European competition before Bodo/Glimt's feat this campaign, which has sharpened the focus on Knutsen. He's been linked with several jobs in England and Scotland, including Celtic, Everton and Leeds United, while Ajax previously failed to tempt him away.

"He's crazy, in a positive way. He's obsessed," says Moberg. "If you're going to work for the club as a player, a coach or whatever, you have to be 100 per cent Bodo/Glimt. If you're not, he doesn't have time for you. Either you have your focus here, or you leave. He's all in."

The midfielder, who lived next door to Knutsen in Bodo, was desperate to impress him. "Almost every night, I turned off the lights in my apartment and sat in the dark for one or two hours because I wanted Kjetil to think that I was going to bed. I had so much respect for him. It was almost like the same respect you have for your father."

Moberg has known Knutsen for more than a decade, first playing under him at Asane, where he was in charge between 2014 and 2016. The year before Knutsen arrived, Asane had almost been relegated from the Norwegian third tier. Knutsen's relentless approach worked. He pushed players far beyond what they thought their limits were as Asane won the title and secured promotion.

"When I look back, we trained exactly the same way as Bodo/Glimt. He was so committed and professional," says Moberg. "I can understand how people could get into conflict with him because he's so stubborn. It's his way; there are no other solutions."

Although Knutsen subsequently kept Asane in the second tier, he was sacked at the end of his third season, but he wasn't out of work for long. Ahead of the 2017 campaign he became the assistant coach at Bodo/Glimt, linking up with Aasmund Bjorkan who he had met on a coaching course and got on well with. This was the start of a vital partnership that continues to define the club's staggering ascent.

At the time, Bjorkan had led Bodo/Glimt for a year, overseeing their relegation from the Eliteserien. But with his new assistant alongside him, they made an immediate top-flight return as second-tier champions. Bjorkan then stepped aside to become sporting director, letting Knutsen take over as manager. "It was the right decision because, for us, he was the head coach," says Moberg.

Knutsen's first campaign was by far the toughest. Pressure grew as Bodo/Glimt laboured just above the relegation zone but, amid speculation that he might be sacked, Knutsen signed a new contract instead. "That was a really big move by the club," insists Moberg. "They showed that they really believed in him. Even if we were going down, he would be our coach."

After narrowly avoiding the drop – finishing in 11th place out of 16, just

Maiden title... Bodo/Glimt players celebrate winning the 2020 Eliteserien

three points above the relegation zone, the following season Bodo/Glimt soared, leading Eliteserien in late August before losing their nerve and finishing second behind Molde. The achievement was enough to see Knutsen named the league's Coach of the Year, and to attract an offer from Norway's most successful club, Rosenborg, who'd won a record 26th title the previous year. But he surprised everyone by turning down the offer, demonstrating his commitment to the club and his belief in what they could achieve.

The stage had been set. Bodo/Glimt were unstoppable in 2020, shattering multiple records as they claimed the first title in the club's history. Knutsen's side won all but four of their 30 league games, losing just once. They scored 103 goals and finished 19 points clear of second-placed Molde. No team had ever blown away the competition so convincingly.

Moberg attributes their success, both that season and beyond, to a relentless work ethic. "We trained exactly the same way all year – really high intensity. It came to a point where it was almost easier to play matches than train. Every new signing thinks they've been training hard at their previous club, but it's nothing compared to Bodo/Glimt. We became better players, every single one of us."

> **"You have to be 100 per cent Bodo/Glimt. If you're not, he doesn't have time for you"**
> **Former Bodo/Glimt midfielder Vegard Moberg on Kjetil Knutsen**

When it comes to attitude and endeavour, Knutsen is uncompromising. "You come to every training session to develop," says Amahl Pellegrino, who joined Bodo/Glimt in August 2021. "He doesn't have any problem sending players back into the gym or sending them home. If you think you're better than everyone else, and you deserve more, then you're in the wrong place."

Playing against Knutsen's side is suffocating, as Pellegrino found with Stromsgodset and Kristiansund. Whenever The Yellow Horde lost possession, they pressed hard to win it back within five seconds. "It was so brutal. They were so fast," Pellegrino recalls. "They were just trying to kill the guy who had the ball, like one of the best Dortmund teams when Klopp was there."

Pellegrino was 31 when he signed for Bodo/Glimt, but Knutsen stressed that he was still capable of more and so it proved. The forward scored 76 goals in 120 games for the club, twice being the Eliteserien top goalscorer and once the division's Player of the Year.

"I really loved playing for Kjetil," he says. "I have huge respect for him and I always will. He's been one of the most important people in my life. He has such a big heart. If you need something, you can come to him, no matter what time it is."

This approach breeds immense trust and loyalty that has been reflected in

JURGEN KLOPP
A firm believer in *gegenpressing*, Knutsen has long admired the dynamism and intensity of Klopp's teams – in particular Liverpool under his stewardship. Although Bodo/Glimt are more controlled in possession, they still generate lots of chances by swarming around the ball to regain it high up the pitch.

AASMUND BJORKAN
Knutsen initially served as his assistant before taking the reins upon winning promotion back to Eliteserien. They still work closely together and have a shared vision for the club. Bjorkan, an ex-Bodo/Glimt player, now operates as a coach and chief analyst.

NILS ARNE EGGEN
The man who built the Rosenborg dynasty, leading them to 14 Norwegian titles, is a clear inspiration. At Eggen's peak Rosenborg were virtually unassailable, winning 13 titles in a row (ten of those under Eggen) and regularly competing in the Champions League. He became a friend and mentor to Knutsen in his later years.

Bodo/Glimt's results. Their run to the Conference League quarter-finals in 2022 broadcast their achievements to a global audience. It featured an extraordinary 6-1 pummelling of the eventual champions Roma, the biggest defeat of Jose Mourinho's career.

"It was a special night at Aspmyra, but it was everyone else who was talking about it afterwards," beams Pellegrino. "The mentality of the team is so strong because you never think about what happened before. Tomorrow is a new day to develop as a player and a person.

"We never thought about if we were playing against a team from Norway or Roma. Sometimes you got a hard lesson in Europe, but we learned a lot in those games. We were really true to our own playing style. In the long run, you gain a lot by doing that."

Knutsen's attacking 4-3-3 system, which has been fine-tuned over several years, is Bodo/Glimt's biggest strength. His players must be brave, hard-working and tactically disciplined to make it function, but in turn it accentuates their strengths, turning the whole team into so much more than the sum of its individual parts.

Several key players – Jens Petter Hauge, Fredrik Andre Bjorkan (son of Aasmund), Hakon Evjen and captain Patrick Berg – have been tempted away by bigger clubs, but ended up returning because they couldn't replicate their best form elsewhere. An environment where everyone understood their roles and was pulling in the same direction made them stars.

Bodo/Glimt's continued progress is founded on a clear identity and consistently smart decision-making. Unlike many surprise packages, they haven't relied on a wealthy benefactor. They've achieved success that feels like it could be sustainable, at least for as long as Knutsen, and the infrastructure behind him, remains in place.

BELOW LEFT: European bow... Knutsen during the 2020-21 Europa League campaign

BELOW: History makers...Bodo/Glimt players celebrate during the Europa League quarter-final penalty shootout win against Lazio

MOISE KEAN

"I knew that Fiorentina was a place where I could do well"

The in-form Fiorentina and Italy striker looks back on his career so far, from starting out at Juventus aged 16, and his time abroad at Everton and Paris Saint-Germain, to now thriving in Florence

How did your passion for football come about?
My older brother played for Pro Vercelli and so, when I was little, I always went to see his games and training. I spent a lot of time playing next to the field where he trained. Watching him play made me more passionate about football.

Which players were you inspired by?
I especially liked strikers, like [Obafemi] Martins and Robinho. I also really liked Ronaldo, the phenomenon. I watched him often. He was an incredible player.

After playing in the academies of Asti and Torino, you made your professional debut for Juventus at just 16. What memories do you have of that moment?
The Juve shirt is a heavy shirt, an important shirt. I felt very lucky to be able to wear it. So I wanted to do well on every opportunity they gave me. I always wanted to give my best and prove my worth.

You went from winning a *Scudetto* with Juventus in 2016-17 to fighting relegation on loan at Hellas Verona in 2017-18. How was that experience?
In Verona, there were still some great players together with me. The year on loan at Hellas helped me a lot to take that step forward. Verona was an important stage for my growth.

Is there a moment or goal that you remember most fondly at Verona?
Yes, definitely, on the day of my first brace in Serie A, when we won 4-1 away against Fiorentina.

After your time in Verona, you returned to a more prominent role at Juventus. You scored six goals as Juve won another *Scudetto*. What memories do you have of that season?
It was a really good moment. It was a phase of my career in which I had to really prove what my value was. Every time [Massimiliano] Allegri gave me an opportunity, I made the most of it. Winning a *Scudetto* is always nice and it was very good and important for me.

Your time in the Premier League at Everton didn't really work out. Why was that?
It was another kind of football, another kind of life, something I wasn't used to. In England, in the first few months, I didn't feel very good. It was my first experience outside Italy and I didn't speak English very well. Then, slowly, I was adapting. But the possibility of going to Paris Saint-Germain came and, at that point, I had no hesitation in accepting it.

The move to PSG was crucial for your career: how did the choice to go to France, to such an important team, come about?
Quite simply, the possibility of going there on loan arose and I immediately accepted.

What was it like playing alongside Neymar and Kylian Mbappe?
With players like them, it's normal that you grow automatically. They are champions and they helped me a lot. Honestly, I didn't expect it, but their help gave me the strength to do well.

What is life like in Paris for a footballer?
Obviously, it depends on how you take it. As far as I'm concerned, it was a great opportunity for me and I had to make the most of it. If you take advantage of it, you do well. If you don't make the most of it, you can get lost.

During your season on loan at PSG you scored a lot of goals, 17 in all competitions. Is one more memorable than any other?
The one against Barcelona, in the first leg of the Champions League round of 16 at the Camp Nou. It was a simple goal, actually, but very important for me and for the team.

After Paris, you joined Juve again, this time on loan from Everton. Why did you return?
I came back with a lot of experience in my backpack. I expected to do well as soon as I arrived and as I got older. And instead, it didn't go as I expected.

Have your spells abroad helped you grow?
Yes, of course, but I felt I just needed my time to grow and mature. The thing I didn't understand was why some people couldn't see that I was just a normal guy, like everyone else. Often, however, they label you in a certain way, they give you an image that does not always correspond to who you really are.

In what sense?
When you're young, you can make mistakes, like all kids your age. The problem is that when you play at certain levels, as soon as you become a professional, they put a label on you. They define you in a certain way, almost as if you could no longer be a normal guy, as it should be. But I have always been. All young people make mistakes, I make mistakes, yet sometimes it seems that for me it is different just because I am a footballer. ➤

ediacom

Debutant...Kean comes on for his senior debut at the tender age of 16

Frustrating... he scored just two Premier League goals for Everton

Did you feel the weight of this label a lot?
Yes, quite.

How did the decision to leave Juventus for Fiorentina come about last summer?
For me it was an easy choice: I didn't think twice. I knew that Fiorentina was a place where I could do well. I knew that it is an environment in which if I gave a lot I would receive a lot in return. Here I knew that I could find a lot of love from the people, who love me so much, and this really makes the difference: that's why I chose Fiorentina.

What is different about Fiorentina compared to previous experiences?
Fiorentina is a football team like any other, it always takes to the field with 11 people, as happens everywhere. Only in Florence there is the warmth of the people, here you feel that there is a positive energy around you that always pushes you to do well. And then here the team has the purple jersey and no other team has it.

What role has your coach Raffaele Palladino played in the extraordinary season you are experiencing, already the most prolific of your career?
The coach is helping me in a great way. For me he is like a father, an older brother, who is giving me the opportunity to show what I can do. I try to repay him on the pitch.

Now, you have more responsibilities than in the past when you were a young talent. A lot is expected of you, in terms of goals and performances. How do you deal with this different kind of pressure?
I am absolutely calm. I'm here to play football, not for anything else. Football is a fun thing; if you experience it as a burden, it becomes really heavy. I don't live with pressure, I always remain myself, even if now I'm more mature.

PSG...Kean played alongside the likes of Kylian Mbappe and Neymar in Paris

> "The national team jersey is very important to me. I have a good relationship with Luciano Spalletti"

What relationship do you have with the *Azzurri* shirt?
The national team jersey is very important to me. I have a good relationship with [Italy head coach] Luciano Spalletti and we try to do well in all games.

What's your fondest Italy moment so far?
Without a doubt my first game as a starter, in Udine against Finland, in which I also scored my first goal for the national team.

With your excellent performances at Fiorentina, do you think you can become a regular starter for your country?
Of course, absolutely. I only think about doing well for Fiorentina. Then it will be Spalletti and his staff who decide. Wearing the national team jersey certainly gives special emotions, but I'm not in a hurry, I don't want to rush anything.

Italy's 2026 World Cup qualifying campaign begins in June against Norway and Moldova. After failing to qualify for Russia 2018 and Qatar 2022, are the *Azzurri* finally ready to return to the World Cup?
Yes! Italy has always had the players and skills to reach the top, at the level of the great national teams. We have always had great players and we can do well.

During your career, you have experienced episodes of racism. How do you see the situation in Italy compared to abroad?
I am very sorry about this. Sometimes it shows how far behind we still are in Italy. It hurts me because I was born here, yet I have experienced certain situations on my skin. Abroad, in theory, they should happen less, but in reality the problem is everywhere. The difference is that in Italy it seems to be more felt. Even the foreign players who arrive here feel it. Many say they perceive a different atmosphere than in other countries, and

Showing respect... Kean after scoring against his former club Juventus in December

this is something that is not good. It marked me, it changed me. It's a theme that is talked about, that we try to work on. But, in the end, nothing has ever really changed.

And in your opinion, what could be done to change this situation?
At this moment, I don't have a precise answer. It's something I've been thinking about for a long time, for years now. But it's complicated. It's like a disease. There are certain things that, even if you work on them, you can't completely eliminate.

Finally, what is your goal as a footballer and as a man?
As a footballer, my goal is definitely to become one of the strongest strikers possible. As a man, however, my goal was to make my family happy. I know I have succeeded, and I am still succeeding. And, in any case, guarantee a better future for my son.

Interview by Emanuele Giulianelli

***Azzurri* striker...Kean scored twice for Italy against Germany in March's UEFA Nations League quarter-final in Dortmund**

JERZY DUDEK

"Wherever I go, everyone remembers this match"

May 2025 marks the 20th anniversary of Liverpool's unforgettable Champions League victory over Milan in Istanbul. The Reds' goalkeeper looks back on one of the most famous matches in football history

Do you realise today what you achieved in 2005?
It was only years later that I noticed that people still live for this final. There's no escaping it. Wherever I go, whether to Africa or Asia, everyone remembers this match. And everyone has their own experiences connected to it. My wife went to the doctors a week after the match. When her name was called out, one of the patients asked if she was from the family of "that goalkeeper from the final". When she said she was my wife, the patient said: "Please give him my regards. I'm here because this match gave me heart problems." The emotions during the final were incredible.

At half-time you were losing 3-0. What changed so much in the second half for Liverpool?
The only person who didn't panic during the break was our manager, Rafa Benitez. He was very calm making a tactical plan for the second half. Didi Hamann was to come on to keep the ball in the middle of the pitch. And when we were going back out from the dressing room one of Rafa's assistants, Alex Miller, gave a motivational speech: "Forget about the first half. You have to score a goal as soon as possible. If you do, they won't panic because they'll still be winning. Then there will be a chance to score a second one. And then they'll start panicking. And if they start kicking the ball out blindly, you have a chance to take it and score a third goal".

Did it really motivate you?
The key thing was that when we were coming out onto the pitch after the break, all the Liverpool fans started singing *You'll Never Walk Alone*. That gave us a bit of confidence. Steven Gerrard called the lads over and said: "Can you hear that? They still believe in us. We have to do something for them". When we scored the first goal, after less than ten minutes, the fans started singing and shouting even louder. That pushed us to keep fighting. And in six minutes we scored three goals. In my opinion, the greatest energy was released in us by our fans.

Everyone remembers the penalty shootout, but that wouldn't have happened without your double save...
In the first half, we played on a really dry pitch. It was incredibly dull because of that. And in the second half, when it got colder and maybe because of higher humidity, the pitch was slippery, which made the ball move faster. But that's why I wasn't able to fully predict how the ball would bounce. And that's what happened in my last save. There was a cross from my right-hand side and I saw a Milan player behind our defender Sami Hyypia. I shouted to him: "Watch out – your back!" I thought he might not reach the ball, so I had to be prepared to defend the shot and I was already positioning myself accordingly. And after this shot, the ball got a strange slip, bouncing off the turf. So the only thing I could do was push it ahead of myself. I felt that there would be another shot in a moment and there was. I intuitively deflected the ball with my hand. It flew high over the crossbar, which showed how powerful the shot was from Andrii Shevchenko. ➤

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Welcome to Anfield...Dudek at Liverpool's ground
Photo credit: Dariusz Kurowski

The "Dudek Dance"...the Liverpool goalkeeper attempts to distract Milan's Andrea Pirlo during the penalty shootout

I knew extra-time was about to end and I thought: "I have been waiting for this moment my whole life". I remembered how I'd been criticised. How people had speculated that Benitez was looking for a new goalkeeper. I thought all my years of hard work were worth it for this moment. That gave me a lot of self-confidence before the shootout.

What was the idea for your famous "Dudek Dance" during the shootout?
Before the match, I received a hundred penalties taken by Milan to watch on DVD. Also those from the Champions League final against Juventus in 2003, which they won after a penalty shootout. Together with the goalkeeping coach Jose Ochotorena, we adopted a tactic whereby when someone approached the penalty, I would raise my left or right hand so to provoke the Milan player to shoot in that corner. And then Jamie Carragher ran up to me and started shouting: "Listen, you've got to provoke them, put more pressure on them. Remember what Grobbelaar did? Always pressure!"

And did you really remember Bruce Grobbelaar?
I remembered him perfectly. I even talked to him about it once. It was in 1984, in the final against Roma, when he made the famous "spaghetti legs". He distracted Francesco Graziani so much in the penalty shootout that he shot over the crossbar and Liverpool won the cup. Going towards the goal, I had in my mind what Carra was saying, to put even more pressure on the Milan players. And I had huge self-confidence after those two saved shots by Shevchenko. For the first penalty, I dived to the right and Serginho hit it over the crossbar. So, basically a copy of the one with Grobbelaar in the leading role from 1984. I thought: "Okay, so I'm putting some pressure on them." That's why I was getting more and more bold, which was later called the "Dudek Dance". But I didn't like that term.

Why not?
Because it wasn't about any dance, but about exerting additional pressure on the taker. But the most important thing was that it was effective. Because I also saved Andrea Pirlo and, at the very end, Shevchenko shots. Out of five penalties, I managed to provoke the players so much that they couldn't handle the pressure and didn't score three. And we won a historic final. There had never been another one like this before and I don't know if there ever will be.

> "I knew extra-time was about to end and I thought: 'I have been waiting for this moment my whole life'"

Double save...Dudek keeps out Shevchenko in extra-time with his goalkeeping heroics

Decisive...Shevchenko watches as his final penalty is saved by Dudek

Goalkeepers' union...Dudek and his fellow goalkeeper Dida

Andrii Shevchenko later became your friend, didn't he?

Sheva was an example to everyone in our part of Europe that you can be the best and win the Ballon d'Or. And then history brought us together. He's still reliving that match. How could he not score it? How did I save it? I always tell him: "You had your five minutes in the final against Juventus two years earlier in Manchester, when you scored past Buffon with the last penalty, and I had mine in the final in Istanbul in 2005."

Then, after the most important game of your life, Benitez put you on the bench...

Every manager who comes to a new club tries to build a team around people who fit his tactics. Rafa was a very good one, so his training methods and the fact that I was part of his team somehow compensated for the fact that I didn't play regularly. I had spoken to him a few times before and he kept telling me not to believe any press speculation that he was looking for a new goalkeeper – and then it turned out that he brought in Pepe Reina. But after two weeks of preparations for the new season I dislocated my elbow and was out of action for three months, so of course he played. And he did very well. I don't have a toxic mentality, so I always tried to help Pepe to prepare him as best as I could.

How did Benitez react to your departure to Real Madrid in 2007?

I didn't tell him, I did it quietly. We had a lot of Spaniards at Liverpool, so thanks to them Real could have full information about what kind of goalkeeper and person I was. I could have gone to a mid-level club, but what for? I preferred to go to Real and see how such a big club functions, how it is organised, how it manages the players. And that was the deciding factor. I thought it would be for a year, but I stayed for four years. I didn't play much because Iker Casillas did, but I saw how he developed. And I experienced the greatest period in the history of Spanish football there with the national team becoming world champions and European champions twice.

Victorious...Liverpool players celebrate after winning the trophy

Reds successor ...Dudek training with Pepe Reina

Madridista...Dudek left Liverpool for Real Madrid in 2007

You do still represent Liverpool though, by playing in their Legends team...
We play at Anfield once a year – last year in front of 60,000 fans! It's amazing and wonderful that after all these years the fans still remember those times with fondness and come to cheer us on.

> "I always tell Shevchenko: 'You had your five minutes in the final against Juventus two years earlier in Manchester, and I had mine in Istanbul in 2005'"

We play for the local community, for the Liverpool FC Foundation, which is a great idea. But we also play in exhibition matches practically all over the world. There's more laughter and fun in our games, without the stress and huge responsibility.

Is it true that you want to run for the Polish FA presidency this year?
First, I want to start working in the local association, in the Silesia district. I suppose this is the best moment for me to act, because the Polish FA needs support. And I don't mean necessarily becoming FA president. I can successfully fulfil myself, for example, in the role of vice-president and gain the necessary experience to see how it works. And maybe later in the future, who knows?

Interview by Dariusz Kurowski

Liverpool Legends...Dudek in action in a "Legends of the North" match against Manchester United in 2022

MOHAMED KALLON

"Sierra Leone has always had talent, but organisation was lacking"

For over two decades, Mohamed Kallon has been the face of Sierra Leonean football. Now, the ex-Internazionale and Monaco striker has stepped into the role of head coach of the national team

What does it mean to you to be the head coach of the Sierra Leone national team?
I'm very honoured and excited. To serve my country as head coach of the senior national team means a lot to me. I played for the national team for over 15 years and was captain for more than a decade. Now it's time to serve in this capacity, and I think it's the right moment because we are planning an evolution, bringing a mix of young and experienced players to build a competitive side that can compete with the best teams in Africa.

What are your main targets?
Our objectives are ambitious. We are setting clear goals for the next three to five years. First, we want to build a strong team with a good mix of players. Then, we will focus on qualifying for one of the major tournaments, whether it's the World Cup or the Nations Cup. Right now, we have the World Cup qualifiers, and we'll do our best to get as many points as possible in the upcoming games.

Sierra Leone has a project called "Concept 27". What does it mean, and what is the target?
Concept 2027 is linked to the Africa Nations Cup. The World Cup qualifiers are tough because only one team qualifies [from the group] and it will be difficult for us to overtake Egypt. That's why we are focusing on Concept 2027 and the Nations Cup qualifiers. My objective is to win as many games as possible, accumulate points and build towards that goal.

What will be your playing style?
My opponents will be reading, so I won't reveal too much about my tactics or philosophy! But Sierra Leone doesn't need major changes. The team has been shaped by several coaches over the past ten years. My role is to bring excitement, allow the players to enjoy the game, and play with passion and love. My goal is to bring hope, motivate the players and share my experience from Europe and Africa to help them play football the right way.

Do you think your experience as a Sierra Leone national team player will help you in this new role?
Yes, but playing football and coaching are two different things. Coaching has its own philosophy and methods. Football is in my DNA; I am passionate about the game. I have played at a high level and I remain involved in football. My experience as a player helps me stay composed and manage the team effectively.

What is the current level of Sierra Leonean football?
It's quite interesting now. Over the last two to three years, we've been competing well in club competitions and more players are being exposed. The domestic league has been played consistently for the past five years, which has helped development. Sierra Leone has always had talent, but organisation was lacking. Now, we are more structured, and with the expertise and experience we bring from Europe, we will add value to Sierra Leonean football.

You also own a club, Kallon Football Club. What is your project with this club?
The club has been around for the past 20 years. I bought it the same year I moved to Inter. It has been doing well, producing and developing many players and focusing on their education. The main objective of FC Kallon is to give back to Sierra Leone, to support young players and to inspire them. If Mohamed Kallon could make it, every kid in Sierra Leone should believe they have the opportunity too.

You are considered a very important figure in Sierra Leone, not only in football but also for your humanitarian projects. What does it mean for you to help your country at such a big level?
Opportunities are limited in Sierra Leone. When you make it in Europe and play for big clubs, expectations from your people are high. So, it's important to come back and support the locals. I've been involved in football development, restructuring, and investing my time and resources. The people appreciate what I do, and I will keep contributing.

Going back to your playing career, what are your memories of your time at Inter, and also of playing alongside the likes of Ronaldo and Christian Vieri?
Coming from Sierra Leone, a small country in West Africa, every opportunity I had to play in Europe was something to celebrate. It was completely different from where I came from. Playing in Europe, with access to top facilities and sharing the field with great players, was a blessing. I am grateful to God for that opportunity and to Italy, which taught me how to play football and shaped my mentality. It made me realise my value and helped me represent African players in Europe.

Now that you are leading the national team, you will work with many young players. What advice do you have for youngsters starting their careers?

Football is a difficult sport that requires perseverance, commitment and determination. Hard work alone is not enough; young players must manage themselves well. This includes their training routines, sleeping habits, diet and overall discipline. Modern football is evolving, and many tools now help players develop physically, mentally and technically. In the past, football was more about technique and talent. Now, players must be determined, educated and understand the game deeply. Everything has gone digital – football is not the same as it was 30 or 40 years ago. Today, players can analyse their performances, study the game online and improve faster. That's why I advise young players to pay attention to all these aspects. It's no longer just about talent; it's about learning, adapting and staying disciplined.

Interview by Emanuele Giulianelli

Glenn Moore

Arsenal return to European elite

The Gunners reach their first Champions League final since 2007, with holders Barcelona waiting

Women's football was very different when Arsenal were last crowned European champions in 2007. What is now the UEFA Women's Champions League was called the UEFA Women's Cup, the final was played over two legs and there was a total attendance of less than 10,000. Arsenal were the nearest England had to a professional women's team but most of the players worked, often in jobs servicing the men's side of the club.

What has not changed, as Arsenal return to the final on May 24 for the first time since that triumph, is that the North London club will very much be the underdogs.

In Lisbon they will face defending champions Barcelona, who beat Chelsea 4-1 in each leg of their semi-final. That's a Chelsea side heading for their sixth successive WSL title, beating Arsenal home-and-away en route.

They can also draw heart from the way they reached Lisbon, overturning first-leg deficits in impressive style against Real Madrid in the quarter-finals and then Lyon in the semis.

Having lost 2-0 in the Spanish capital, they foreshadowed the men's team's result against Real a fortnight later with an impressive 3-0 win at the Emirates, Alessia Russo scoring twice ether side of a goal from former Barcelona player Mariona Caldentey.

The contrasting approach of the two clubs was clear: Real hosted their match at the Estadio Alfredo Di Stefano, which is part of the training ground complex, on a sodden pitch that cut up badly. There were 3,102 in attendance.

Prior to the second leg, watched by 22,517 spectators at the Emirates, Arsenal's Dutch manager Renee Slegers said it will be "easier on a golf course than rocks" and she was proved right.

> When Arsenal return to the final on May 24 for the first time since their 2007 triumph, the North London club will very much be the underdogs

In 2007, Arsenal were up against Umea of Sweden. They now play in the second tier but were a powerhouse at the time reaching five finals from 2002 to 2008, winning twice. Against the Gunners, they fielded four World Cup finalists including Brazilian great Marta, who would go on to win the Golden Boot in that year's World Cup finals.

Arsenal, meanwhile, fielding a squad entirely drawn from the British Isles, were without their superstar, Kelly Smith, as the England striker was suspended after being shown a red card in the semi-final.

Yet Arsenal won the tie 1-0 on aggregate, thanks to a rare goal during first-leg stoppage-time in Sweden from right-back Alex Scott.

Scott is not the only member of that team oft-seen at the Emirates after forging a successful media career, and the modern Arsenal will not be short of voices telling them to take inspiration from that upset.

Lyon had an easier path, effectively wrapping up their quarter-final in the opening leg with a 2-0 win in Munich. Bayern raised hopes of a comeback by taking a first-half lead in the second leg, but after the break Lyon scored four without reply for a 6-1 aggregate win.

The eight-times winners looked set to progress to a 12th final after winning the semi-final first leg 2-1 in front of 40,000-plus in London. Arsenal created more and better chances, but the French champions were more incisive.

Holders...Barcelona forward Claudia Pina celebrates scoring against Chelsea

Knowing Arsenal would leave gaps behind attacking left-back Katie McCabe, Lyon kept Kadidiatou Diani high and were rewarded with an early goal. Though Caldentey levelled with a 78th-minute penalty Lyon replied with a razor-sharp break and finish by Melchie Dumornay.

But if that was a tactical triumph for their ex-Gunners coach Joe Montemurro, the Australian's decision to change personnel and formation in the second leg did not pay off.

Individual errors did not help – Arsenal's first and last goals followed defensive howlers – but Caldentey's killer in first-half stoppage-time, which put Arsenal ahead on aggregate, was a stunning strike. They were 4-0 up on the day before Dumornay's belated reply, in Lyon's first defeat of the season.

A few hours earlier, at Stamford Bridge, Barcelona had put Chelsea to the sword for the second time in a week.

In Catalonia, with Hannah Hampton saving an early Alexia Putellas penalty, Chelsea were only 1-0 down at half-time. Even after Claudia Pina struck, they were somehow still in the tie when Sandy Baltimore pulled a goal back after 74 minutes. However, as Chelsea tired of chasing the ball, late goals from Irene Paredes and Pina ensured the scoreline reflected the balance of play.

Chelsea had come back from losing the quarter-final first leg 2-0 at Manchester City, brushing their injury-hit opponents aside 3-0 in the return,

Clinical...Alessia Russo fires Arsenal into the Champions League final

but there was no chance of a repeat against Barcelona once Aitana Bonmati was allowed to run 50 yards to increase the holders' advantage after 25 minutes. It was 3-0 by half-time and 4-0 before Wieke Kaptein's forlorn consolation.

Barcelona had been just as brutal in the quarter-finals, eviscerating Wolfsburg 10-2 over two legs including a 4-1 win in Germany. They thus go into the final having scored a goal every 20 minutes in the knockout stages while playing Wolfsburg and Chelsea, two of Europe's best teams.

It's a daunting prospect for Arsenal. They may match Barca on previous head-to-heads, but their 4-0 and 3-0 wins were in 2012-13, while the Spanish club were still developing their women's team. More recently, Barca won 4-0 and 4-1 in 2021-22.

But Arsenal have been impressive since Jonas Eidevall's assistant Slegers took over, initially temporarily, in October. Her main decision is whether they seek to play their usual expansive game against Barca, risking leaving space for the masters of geometry to exploit, or aim for a containing game with a low block. Unlike Lyon, however, they are not blessed with pace in attack.

Arsenal have plenty of experience – the 50,000 expected at Sporting's Estadio Jose Alvalade won't faze a team used to playing in front of such crowds – and they have scoring potential.

Barca, seeking a fourth win in five years and third in succession, will start as heavy favourites – but then again, so did Umea.

Round-up

Olympics expansion...the US will defend their gold medals on home soil in 2028

OLYMPICS EXPANSION FOR LA

The Los Angeles 2028 Olympics will feature an expanded women's finals with 16 teams, up from 12, with the men's competition shrinking from 16 to 12.

The expansion will simplify qualifying for the quarter-finals with an end to the best third-place route via which 2024 finalists Brazil progressed, but not an increase in matches per team. However, even the present schedule of six matches in less than 18 days for the last four was a concern in Paris due to the enhanced injury risk.

The change reflects the women's competition being of greater status within the sport than the men's, which is primarily an U23 event, and the high profile of women's soccer in the US.

WORLD CUPS SET FOR THE UNITED STATES AND UK

The United States is set to host the Women's World Cup in 2031, five years after the men's event. Hosting of the finals could be shared with "other CONCACAF members," according to FIFA president Gianni Infantino.

Infantino also said that the 2035 finals will be played in the UK, with England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland providing "the one valid bid" for the tournament. "The hard work starts now to put together the best possible bid by the end of the year," said FA chief executive Mark Bullingham.

Top of the table... Melbourne City

CANADIAN LEAGUE RISES

The Northern Super League, Canada's first domestic professional women's competition, had a successful launch with more than 14,000 spectators attending Vancouver's BC Place to see the home team beat Calgary Wild 1-0. Canada international Quinn scored the only goal for Vancouver Rise with a 22nd-minute penalty.

Only the lower tier of the 51,000-seater venue was open, but the atmosphere was vibrant and the gate exceeded expectations. The men's Canadian Premier League averages less than 4,000.

STRAUS' SUMMER SWITCH

With Bayern Munich heading for a third successive Bundesliga title, coach Alexander Straus announced he was leaving at the end of the season. The following day he was confirmed as Angel City's new coach, starting work at the NWSL club on June 1.

CITY ON TOP DOWN UNDER

Melbourne City retained the A-League Women's regular season title with a thumping 5-1 final-match victory at Perth Glory. They and Melbourne Victory headed straight into the second phase of the six-team play-off process. Adelaide United, Canberra United, Central Coast Mariners and Western United contested the first stage.

Missing out were defending champions Sydney FC, who beat Melbourne City in last season's grand final, and had made the top four every season since the league began in 2008-09.

VEURINK TO LEAD *ORANJE*

Arjan Veurink, England assistant under Sarina Wiegman, will leave after this summer's Euros to replace Andries Jonker as Netherlands head coach.

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UEFA Nations League...preview of the 2025 finals

Germany

NICK BIDWELL

Four heavyweights set for UEFA Nations League finals

The finals of the 2024-25 UEFA Nations League pits four genuinely elite nations against each other in Germany

Cynical pundits who not so long ago deemed the new UEFA Nations League to be a turn-off, a set of fixtures elite countries automatically would snub, suddenly have gone to ground. The final four of this season's competition, to be held in southern Germany in early June, has not the merest hint of the sub-standard, made up of three World Cup winners (France, Germany and Spain) plus a one-time European champion in Portugal.

Every tournament needs the hosts to prosper and optimism is growing locally that the *Nationalmannschaft* could go all the way. The Germans have the distinct advantage of playing at home, are in fine fettle at the moment – undefeated in eight matches this term – and boast a brilliant field marshal in coach Julian Nagelsmann, who has overseen notable improvements in their pressing game and offensive fluidity. In further good news for the Germans, boy wonder Florian Wirtz is making a good recovery from an ankle injury and should be available.

A trio of Bayern Munich talent may hold the key for Germany. Attacking midfield starlet Jamal Musiala represents a constant menace with his dribbling ability and goalscoring instincts, while right-back Joshua Kimmich underlined his worth in the 5-4 aggregate victory over Italy in the quarter-finals, creating three goals with inch-perfect crosses and converting a penalty too. Back in the international arena after a 16-month absence, Bayern midfielder Leon Goretzka has also been looking the part, on the scoresheet with the winner in the first leg against the

Hosts...Germany saw off Italy in the quarter-finals

Rematch...France and Spain clashed at last summer's Euros in Germany

Azzurri and combining vision and style in a wide-ranging hybrid role, part number six, part number ten.

In the semi-finals, the hosts will face Portugal in Munich, where the final will also be held. The Germans are very much a bogey team for the Portuguese. In 11 competitive encounters the *Selecao* have only won twice, the last of which came 25 long years ago, a 3-0 romp in Rotterdam in the group stage of Euro 2000.

The all-important question is which Portugal will turn up at the Allianz Arena? Will it be the side that performed so shoddily when losing 1-0 in Denmark in the first leg of their Nations League quarter-final, undoubtedly the worst display in the two-and-a-half year tenure of coach Roberto Martinez? Or the team that so splendidly turned the tables in the return, going through 5-3 on aggregate? "We're Portugal and we're a good team too," insists defender Nelson Semedo. "We can beat anybody."

In the other semi-final, in Stuttgart, continental heavyweights Spain and France go head-to-head in a remake of the Euro 2024 semi-final, which the Iberians edged 2-1. An intriguing clash of styles should be on the cards, with the exuberant, ever-inventive *La Roja* facing the solid, pragmatic French.

Les Bleus coach Didier Deschamps, now in his 13th year in charge and due to walk into the sunset after next year's World Cup, has long been criticised for his conservatism. So what a surprise it was to see him select no fewer than four out-and-out forwards (Michael Olise, Bradley Barcola, Kylian Mbappe and Ousmane Dembele) for the second leg of the Nations League quarter-final against Croatia at the Stade de France, where the French fought back from a 2-0 first-leg deficit to eventually go through on penalties.

Continental heavyweights Spain and France go head-to-head in a remake of the Euro 2024 semi-final, which the Iberians edged 2-1

Forced by circumstances to release the handbrake, France certainly benefitted from this far more adventurous approach, playing with greater pace and rhythm and pinning the Croats back with a ferocious high press. But will Deschamps be brave enough to carry on in the same vein here? The smart money says he will revert to safety-first, though may hope to balance it out by replacing Barcola on the right flank with his Paris Saint-Germain team-mate Desire Doue, the recipient of rave reviews galore of late and scorer of a stunning goal in the Champions League quarter-final against Aston Villa.

Spain boss Luis de la Fuente, who described his charges as "insatiable and ambitious" after their penalty-shootout victory against the Netherlands in the quarter-finals, has every reason to be confident of defending the Nations League title *La Roja* acquired in 2023. His side are the reigning European champions, are on an 18-match unbeaten run and possess a supply line of talent that just never seems to dry up. The likes of Pedri, Lamine Yamal and Nico Williams have now been joined by the next crop of tyros, many of whom happen to be centre-backs: Barcelona's Pau Cubarsi, Raul Asencio of Real Madrid and Dean Huijsen, Bournemouth's Amsterdam-born 20-year-old who became a Spanish citizen through residency last year and who has sparkled in England.

If the final stages are anything like as entertaining as the quarter-finals, we will be in for a treat.

Chasing glory ...will Cristiano Ronaldo lift another international prize?

Sri Lanka

JOHN DUERDEN

Delay to SAFF Championship

The South Asian tournament, which was due to take place in Sri Lanka, will instead be played in 2026 with a revised format

Returning hero... India's Sunil Chhetri

For the last seven years, the Sri Lanka national team has been firmly placed down in the 200s of the FIFA world rankings, but things were looking up. Yet the islanders' positive mood was somewhat punctured by the decision to delay the next South Asian Football Federation (SAFF) Championship, which was supposed to take place in Colombo.

The would-be hosts' hopes of getting out of the group for just the second time since 2009 were boosted in March when the third round of qualification for the 2027 Asian Cup kicked off. Although their first game of the stage ended in defeat (1-0 to Thailand), it was hugely encouraging. Thailand may not be a continental powerhouse but were ranked 97th, a full 103 places above the visitors. For Sri Lanka to give the Thais a game in Bangkok was testament to the improvements made.

That result followed wins over Laos and Yemen and a draw away to Myanmar. Historically, these teams have all been a level above Sri Lanka – several levels in Thailand's case – but not anymore.

Like a number of teams in Asia, from Indonesia to Palestine to Afghanistan, the Lions have recently been tapping into a widespread diaspora. Players like Jack Hingert and Sam Durrant, born in London and Liverpool respectively to a Sri Lankan parent, have helped raise the level. Hingert, for example, scored the winner against Yemen in Qatar in November.

This new policy started early in the decade and intensified under Andy Morrison, the former Manchester City, Blackpool, Huddersfield Town and Plymouth Argyle defender, who was in charge from 2022 to 2024. His replacement, the Kuwaiti coach Abdullah Al Mutairi, has worked in the region, with time spent in charge of Nepal and Afghanistan, and has inspired his players with rallying cries such as "Lions will never be vegetarian".

Sri Lanka are, almost certainly, not going to qualify for the 2027 Asian Cup – Thailand are strong favourites to claim the only qualifying spot at the top of their group, so finishing above Taiwan and offering a challenge to Turkmenistan would be a good showing. But the SAFF Championship is different, providing an opportunity to be competitive – even for the region's lowest-ranked team.

Playing on home soil certainly would have given them an even better chance. But in April, the SAFF announced a one-year delay and a revised home-and-away format for the tournament. "More arrangement needed to be in place to deliver the competition in a smooth manner," read an SAFF statement.

> "More arrangement needed to be in place to deliver the competition"
> South Asian Football Federation statement

Still, just participating in next year's event will be a step forward for the Sri Lankans, having been unable to take part in 2023 due to a FIFA suspension.

India will remain the team to beat after winning nine of the 14 tournaments held so far, although the Blue Tigers will

Vastly improving... Sri Lanka ahead of their meeting with Thailand in March

hope that a new-look strikeforce has emerged by then. In March, legendary striker Sunil Chhetri came out of international retirement to score in a 3-0 friendly win over Maldives, his 95th goal for the national team (Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi are the only active men's internationals with more). The 40-year-old forward hung up his India boots last June but, with no other local striker regularly finding the net in the Indian Super League, he was brought back to boost hopes of Asian Cup qualification. If he's still leading the line next year, questions will be asked.

Bangladesh will also be contenders. Buoyed by the arrival of English-born midfielder Hamza Choudhury, currently on loan at EFL side Sheffield United from Leicester City, the Bengal Tigers will have their sights set on a second SAFF title, 23 years after the first.

Naturalised... Bangladesh's new midfielder Hamza Choudhury

Sri Lanka will not have players of that calibre, but can measure themselves against others in the region. Maldives are the tournament's most successful team after India, having won in 2008 and 2018, but have struggled of late and don't have access to the same diaspora as their fellow islanders.

Nepal, who reached the final in 2021, may rue the postponement. Just days after appointing Australian coach Matt Ross in March, the Gurkhas won 1-0 in a friendly in Singapore before going down fighting in Malaysia in Asian Cup qualifying. More progress along the same lines could see them in the hunt next year.

Pakistan will likely be delighted for the delay until 2026 given their recent FIFA ban and general chaos, while Bhutan will always be happy just to give the strongest powers in the region a game.

A 2026 regional championship may give Sri Lanka the time they need to gel their new faces and really become a force in South Asia. It could be an interesting few months ahead.

Slovakia

LUKAS VRABLIK

England U21s set out to defend European crown

Lee Carsley's Young Lions will be chief among the favourites for the upcoming Under-21 European Championship in Slovakia

German threat... Nick Woltemade scores against Spain in March

Holders...England won the previous edition in 2023

Europe's elite talent will be showcased this June, as 16 top European Under-21 sides face-off in Slovakia. England, Germany and France will be among the favourites to win the tournament, which will involve not only the stars of the future but also the present. However, the cluttered football calendar might prove to be an obstacle for that.

The championship will be played from June 11 to June 28, clashing with the start of the Club World Cup, which will prevent some of the continent's best young talents from taking part. Players born on or after January 1, 2002 are eligible to participate and, normally, FIFA regulations state that their clubs are obliged to let them represent their countries during the international window. However, the first edition of FIFA's newly-expanded Club World Cup competition means there is an exception this time, with the participating clubs having the option of holding on to their talents.

That ruling could weaken some of the teams, including defending champions England. Back in 2023, the Young Lions won the trophy by beating Spain 1-0 in the final, going all the way without losing a game or even conceding a goal. Coach Lee Carsley, after his brief spell in charge of the senior side, is back again and expectations are understandably high.

England's squad is expected to be strong, including four players who played at the 2023 tournament: Taylor Harwood-Bellis, Charlie Cresswell, Jarrad Branthwaite and Harvey Elliott. They could be joined by the likes of Adam Wharton, Elliot Anderson and Ethan Nwaneri, although Rico Lewis and James McAtee are likely to be in the United States with Manchester City.

It is a squad rich with experience already. In Carsley's most recent squad for the March friendlies, the 24 players averaged more than 80 career league appearances each, many in the Premier League. Jarell Quansah, Morgan Rogers, Myles Lewis-Skelly and James Trafford – the hero of the previous final with a late penalty save – were involved with Thomas Tuchel's senior side but could come back into contention for the tournament in Slovakia.

Carsley has quality in every department, but England are not the only strong side at the finals. Their first test will come in the group stage against Germany, whose current crop of players is led by Antonio Di Salvo, an experienced coach who was previously Stefan Kuntz's assistant when they won the Euro U21s twice, in 2017 and 2021. Di Salvo then took over as head coach and has a very impressive squad, with many of the players starring regularly in the Bundesliga.

> Carsley has quality in every department, but England aren't the only strong side at the finals

That includes Stuttgart striker Nick Woltemade, who scored a hat-trick

against Spain's Under-21s in March, while winger Paul Nebel (Mainz), midfielder Rocco Reitz (Borussia Monchengladbach), goalkeeper Noah Atubolu (Freiburg) and left-back Nathaniel Brown (Eintracht Frankfurt) are ones to watch, too.

France are also in very good shape heading into the tournament, having beaten England (5-3) and Slovakia (4-0) in the March friendlies. Coach Gerald Baticle relies on an array of attacking talent, including Hugo Ekitike (Eintracht Frankfurt), Rayan Cherki (Lyon), Mathys Tel (Tottenham), Arnaud Kalimuendo (Rennes) and Maghnes Akliouche (Monaco).

Portugal's long-serving coach Rui Jorge, who has been in charge of the team since 2010 and led them to silver medals in 2015 and 2021, also has an interesting squad to select from. Fabio Silva has had a positive season on loan at Las Palmas from Wolverhampton Wanderers and was the top scorer in qualifying with eight goals, so he will lead the line, ably supported by winger Carlos Forbs (Wolves) and creative midfielder Matheus Fernandes (Southampton). Portugal have never won the tournament, but they have a chance of ending that record this year.

After coming so close last time, Spain coach Santi Denia has brought an impressive group of players – mainly from La Liga clubs, but also including Al Ahli's Gabri Veiga. Denia, who led the Under-23s to Olympic gold last summer, has Spain playing attacking football, but his plans could also be undermined by the Club World Cup with Real Madrid and Atletico Madrid both taking part.

Locally, much is expected of the hosts Slovakia: last time they hosted, in 2000, the team reached the semi-finals, but being drawn in a group with Italy, Spain and Romania makes things difficult this time around.

Elsewhere, Italy and the Netherlands will have the ambition and the ability to fight for medals, while Georgia, who reached the quarter-finals in 2023, could be among the surprise packages.

Final host...the National Stadium in Bratislava

THE DRAW

GROUP A
- Slovakia
- Spain
- Italy
- Romania

GROUP B
- Czech Republic
- England
- Germany
- Slovenia

GROUP C
- Portugal
- France
- Poland
- Georgia

GROUP D
- Finland
- Netherlands
- Ukraine
- Denmark

Solomon Islands

STEVE MENARY

Auckland City stay top of the Oceania tree

New Zealanders claim their fourth consecutive OFC Champions League crown and 13th in total

Thirteen was not unlucky for Auckland City as the champions of New Zealand secured yet another Oceania Champions League crown with a 2-0 victory over Papua New Guinea's Hekari United.

Goals in each half from striker Myer Bevan, who returned to New Zealand last year after a two-year spell in Canada, delivered a fourth title in a row for Auckland City.

Hekari United, making their first appearance in the final since winning the competition back in 2010, started strongly with an aggressive high press and PNG international Ati Kepo nodded wide early on. Auckland were forced to defend for most of the first half until, against the run of play, Bevan produced a clever backheel from Haris Zeb's cross to open the scoring.

The game remained close, and Auckland suffered a blow when the dangerous Zeb had to come off with cramp. Yet his replacement Matt Ellis

Midfield maestro... Auckland's Dylan Manickum holds off a challenge v Hekari United in the final *Credit: OFC Media via Phototek*

Champions again... Auckland City lift their 13th OFC Champions League trophy *Credit: OFC Media via Phototek*

proved equally threatening and, when he was brought down in the box, Bevan scored the resulting penalty in the 83rd minute to take Auckland City home.

The entire tournament was hosted by the Solomon Islands and despite the early elimination of the home club, Central Coast, a healthy crowd of 6,000 saw the final in Honiara.

Victory ensured that Auckland remain the dominant club in the region and, although they had a series of tighter games this year, they claimed another crown while only conceding a single goal – scored by Rewa's John Orobulu – in five matches.

Their campaign began at the Lawson Tama Stadium in Honiara, with a tough opening game in Group A against Pirae, the Tahitian side who had made the final of last year's OFC Champions League. The Tahitians were left to rue a missed penalty as a 41st-minute goal from Dylan Manickum won the game for the Kiwis.

A site engineer and captain of the All Whites' futsal side, Manickum was on target again in the second game against New Caledonia's Tiga Sport, who had kicked off the group with a confident 4-2 win over Fijian champions Rewa.

In another close game, Auckland City only made sure of a 2-0 win over Tiga with a stoppage-time goal from substitute Zeb.

Auckland City made a number of changes for their final group game and were held to a 1-1 draw by previously pointless Rewa. Zeb did his best to gain the attention of selectors in Pakistan, where he is eligible, with a stoppage-time equaliser to save the Kiwis from an embarrassing loss.

That left Pirae and Tiga to compete for the runners-up spot.

> **Victory ensured that Auckland remain the dominant club in the region and they claimed another crown while only conceding a single goal**

After losing to Auckland in the first group match, Pirae had got their semi-final chances back on track with a win against Rewa – but only just. The Tahitians' goalkeeper Francois Decoret suffered a gash that led to 23 minutes of stoppage time. After Mathis Lacan was brought down in the box, a penalty in minute 90+18 was scored by Yohann Tihoni to win the game.

That set up a decider against Tiga. A 1-1 draw left the teams level on four points and on goal difference, but Tiga progressed by virtue of more goals scored, having beaten Rewa 4-2.

Over in Group B, eventual finalists Hekari United began by hammering Solomon Islands champions Central Coast 3-0 at Honiara's National Stadium in their opening fixture.

Their second game was far closer, falling behind against Ifira Black Bird in the second half when Jordy Tasip beat the offside trap to score in the 67th minute. But a glancing header from Erick Joe in the 81st minute secured a draw for the PNG side, before they sealed top spot by outclassing Tupapa Maraerenga of the Cook Islands 9-0 in the final game.

Having remained unbeaten in the group, with two draws and a win, Ifira Black Bird also progressed to the semi-finals. Facing Auckland City and trailing 1-0 to a Zeb opener after 25 minutes, the champions of Vanuatu were very much in the game until a late goal by Bevan took Auckland through.

The other semi-final between Tiga Sport and Hekari was also close and settled by Rex Naime's 27th-minute goal.

Auckland City will now represent the Oceania region at FIFA's Intercontinental Cup later this year, but the main event will be playing at the Club World Cup in the US in June.

Match-winner...Myer Bevan celebrates one of his two goals in the final *Credit: OFC Media via Phototek*

Thailand

STEVE MENARY

Staying up... Phuket Andaman celebrate their final-day victory

Building a club in the land of smiles

British-owned Phuket Andaman FC are looking to the future after dramatically avoiding relegation

The island of Phuket will be a name familiar to backpackers and holiday-makers from all over the world. Yet visitors to its temples, beaches or full-moon parties might be surprised to learn that the region has a professional football team – for another season, at least.

In March, Phuket Andaman kept their place in Thailand's League 3 South, the lowest level of professional football in the country, with a nervy 1-0 win against FC Yala on the final day of the campaign. Defeat would have sent them down into the semi-professional fourth tier, known as the TS, which would have been a major blow to the new British owners, the Higher Sports Academy, who took over the club last August.

Their first season in charge has been tumultuous, with the head coach changing three times. They have not been helped by being forced to play their home games a two-hour drive away in Phang Nga. The 15,000-capacity Surakul Stadium, which is owned by the local municipality, is undergoing a major overhaul ahead of the South East Asian Games, which takes place at the end of 2025.

Building site...work is underway at the Surakul Stadium

Amidst that uncertainty, no wins had been registered in 2025 going into that crucial decider with FC Yala. Under the guidance of interim coach Henry Leask, a host of key players were dropped including club captain Kla Patapee and top goalscorer Bank Sarod.

But the gamble paid off. Puttipong Chanchaemseri converted a late penalty and, with relegation rivals Yala City held to a draw, Phuket Andaman stayed in the third tier.

Russ Horsley, the CEO of Hertford-based Higher Sports Academy, says that his team won't be able to return to their home until Christmas at the earliest. But he is at least able to plan for a future in the professional game.

"We hope to retain seven or eight of the players from last year and maybe bring back a couple who left," he says. "We want to encourage youth at the club. We had a great response to our international trial in May and we will have a trial for Thai players the first week of June. We are also much better placed this year to approach players directly.

"We will also be introducing new technology to the club, which we hope will help improve player and team performance."

During the season, the club brought in some overseas players including US striker Luke Pavone and Dutch defender Kai Boham.

"It was difficult sometimes to adapt," says Boham, who previously played in the academies of Telstar and Almere City in the Netherlands. "The biggest differences are the weather and the style of play, which is the opposite of Dutch football. I have learned to always search for the footballing option instead of a long ball forward. But because of the bumpy fields, this is a big risk because the ball can go everywhere.

> "We want to encourage youth at the club"
> Russ Horsley, Phuket Andaman owner

"Besides the bad pitches, the competition is very professional and you can feel that the football lives all around you. I hope to stay at the club next season, but I am first going back home to the Netherlands. And then I will see what my possibilities are for next season."

After a difficult first season, Horsley will be hoping that the possibilities for Phuket Andaman will be more positive now a professional future is secured.

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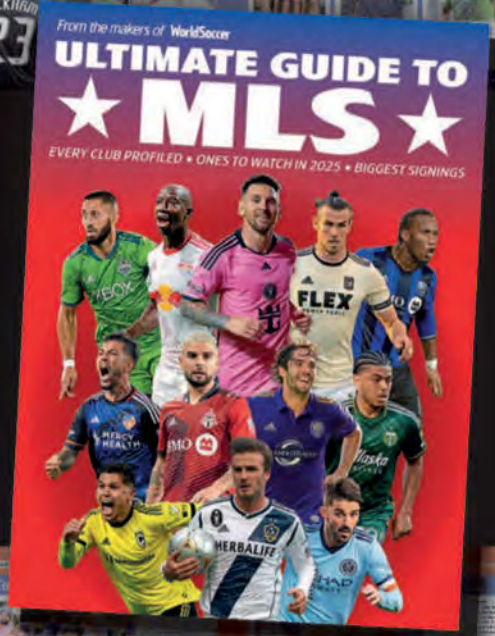

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Historic...Mushuc Runa players celebrate beating Cruzeiro

CHAOS AND CANCELLATIONS IN BENIN

Benin's Championnat National has more clubs (36 in total, divided into two groups of 18) than almost any other top-flight league worldwide – and arguably more chaos too.

During the recent Group A game between Loto-Popo and Bani Ganse, home supporters allegedly broke into the away team bus and sprayed an irritant onto the seats that left the visiting players itching all the way home. Loto-Popo denied the accusation and hit back with a counter-allegation that a member of the Bani Ganse staff had dropped suspicious substances onto the pitch at half-time – a threat they claimed to have neutralised using holy water.

Meanwhile, over in Group B, Sitatunga's match against ASVO was cancelled because the required emergency service personnel were busy fighting fires and attending to accidents elsewhere. Officials arrived at the stadium around half an hour before the scheduled kick-off time to say that they needed to prioritise several incidents in the city of Calavi, prompting the home side to volunteer the support of their club doctor and his team in a bid to ensure the game could go ahead. But it was all to no avail. To make matters worse, the Benin Football Federation punished Sitatunga with a 3-0 defeat.

ECUADOR'S INDIGENOUS TRAILBLAZERS

Mushuc Runa, the first indigenous football club in Ecuador's top flight, have made a flying start to their Copa Sudamericana campaign, beating Palestino of Chile and Argentina's Union at home either side of an historic win against Brazilians Cruzeiro away in their opening three games.

Founder Luis Alfonso Chango described the latter victory, which was only the second match his club had ever contested outside of Ecuador, as a "*Maracanazo* moment" – a reference to Brazil's devastating defeat to Uruguay on home soil in the 1950 World Cup final.

Established in the central Tungurahua province in 2003, Mushuc Runa – whose name literally translates as "New Man" – reached the Ecuadorian top flight for the first time in 2014 and returned to the division in 2019.

For all their success, they have stayed true to their indigenous roots. Club communications are often conducted in both Spanish and Quechua (the local language), and the players have been known to celebrate goals by running to the corner flag and donning red ponchos, the traditional attire for men in the Chibuleo community, which is featured on the club's badge.

THE PORTUGUESE DERBY IN MACAU

Copycat clubs are nothing new in football – there's a Liverpool in Uruguay, a Barcelona in Ecuador, a Juventus in Haiti and a River Plate in Aruba to name but a few – but there are few cases quite like Macau, where the offshoots of two city rivals from another continent battle it out in the local league.

The special administrative region of China, which is the most densely populated place on Earth and was a Portuguese colony for more than four centuries, is home to two clubs whose names are more closely associated with the city of Lisbon more than 10,000km away: Benfica and Sporting.

Both Benfica de Macau and Sporting Clube de Macau were founded last century as official branches of their Portuguese namesakes, who made regular trips to Macau and took the best players home with them. Some, like forward Augusto Francisco Rocha and defender Joaquim Pacheco, even went on to represent Portugal at international level.

The territory passed into Chinese hands in 1999, but both clubs still play in the Liga de Elite and have won the title on multiple occasions. Benfica have been the much more successful club of late, however, and recently beat their rivals by a 4-0 scoreline.

Lee Wingate

COMING UP...

Arminia Bielefeld v Stuttgart
German Cup final, May 24
Arminia Bielefeld will travel to Berlin hoping to become the first third-tier club to win a primary domestic cup in Europe since Bulgarians CSKA Sofia in 2016. The demand for final tickets has been through the roof, with the DFB receiving 1.66 million requests by mid-April.

Ibiza v Ceuta
Primera Federacion, May 25
This final-day clash will see two teams from outside mainland Spain compete for promotion. Ceuta, based in a Spanish exclave 17km across the water in continental Africa, are aiming to return to the second tier for the first time since 1968.

Venezuela v Bolivia
World Cup qualifying, June 5-6
Venezuela, the only country in CONMEBOL never to have reached a World Cup, could take a big step towards the intercontinental play-offs in their next qualifier. Bolivia, who are just one place and one point behind them, fare well in their high-altitude home stadium but have a dismal away record.

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Club Football

EUROPE

2024-25 UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 8 – London
Arsenal (Eng) 3 (Rice 58, 70, Merino 75)
Real Madrid (Spa) 0

Apr 8 – Munich
Bayern Munich (Ger) 1 (Muller 85)
Internazionale (Ita) 2 (Martinez 38, Frattesi 88)

Apr 9 – Barcelona
Barcelona (Spa) 4 (Raphinha 25, Lewandowski 48, 66, Yamal 77)
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 0

Apr 9 – Paris
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 3 (Doue 39, Kvaratskhelia 49, Mendes 90+2)
Aston Villa (Eng) 1 (Rogers 35)

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Apr 15 – Birmingham
Aston Villa (Eng) 3 (Tielemans 32, McGinn 55, Konsa 57)
PSG (Fra) 2 (Hakimi 11, Mendes 27)
Paris Saint-Germain win 5-4 on aggregate

Apr 15 – Dortmund
B. Dortmund (Ger) 3 (Guirassy 11 pen, 49, 76)
Barcelona (Spa) 1 (Bensebaini 54 og)
Barcelona win 5-3 on aggregate

Apr 16 – Madrid
Real Madrid (Spa) 1 (Vinicius Junior 67)
Arsenal (Eng) 2 (Saka 65, Martinelli 90+3)
Arsenal win 5-1 on aggregate

Apr 16 – Milan
Internazionale (Ita) 2 (Martinez 58, Pavard 61)
Bayern Munich (Ger) 2 (Kane 52, Dier 76)
Internazionale win 4-3 on aggregate

2024-25 EUROPA LEAGUE

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 10 – Bodo
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 2 (Saltnes 47, 69)
Lazio (Ita) 0

Apr 10 – London
Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) 1 (Porro 26)
Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger) 1 (Ekitike 6)

Apr 10 – Glasgow
Rangers (Sco) 0
Athletic Club (Spa) 0

Apr 10 – Lyon
Lyon (Fra) 2 (Almada 26, Cherki 90+5)
Manchester United (Eng) 2 (Yoro 45+5, Zirkzee 88)

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Apr 17 – Rome
Lazio (Ita) 3 (Castellanos 21, Noslin 90+3, Dia 100)
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 1 (Helmersen 109)
After Extra-Time. 3-3 on aggregate
Bodo/Glimt win 3-2 on pens

Apr 17 – Frankfurt
Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger) 0
Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) 1 (Solanke 43 pen)
Tottenham Hotspur win 2-1 on aggregate

Apr 17 – Bilbao
Athletic Club (Spa) 2 (Sancet 45+4 pen, N. Williams 80)
Rangers (Sco) 0
Athletic Club win 2-0 on aggregate

Apr 17 – Manchester
Manchester Utd (Eng) 5 (Ugarte 10, Dalot 45+1, Fernandes 114 pen, Mainoo 120, Maguire 120+1)
Lyon (Fra) 4 (Tolisso 71, Tagliafico 78, Cherki 105, Lacazette 110 pen)
After Extra-Time. Man Utd win 7-6 on aggregate

2024-25 CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 10 – Seville
Real Betis (Spa) 2 (Bakambu 24, J. Rodriguez 45+2)
Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) 0

Apr 10 – Celje
Celje (Svn) 1 (Delaurier-Chaubet 68 pen)
Fiorentina (Ita) 2 (Ranieri 27, Mandragora 62 pen)

Apr 10 – Warsaw
Legia Warsaw (Pol) 0
Chelsea (Eng) 3 (George 49, Madueke 57, 74)

Apr 10 – Stockholm
Djurgarden (Swe) 0
Rapid Vienna (Aut) 1 (Finndell 62 og)

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Apr 17 – Bialystok
Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) 1 (Churlinov 81)
Real Betis (Spa) 1 (Bakambu 78)
Real Betis win 3-1 on aggregate

Apr 17 – Florence
Fiorentina (Ita) 2 (Mandragora 37, Kean 67)
Celje (Svn) 2 (Matko 54, Nemanic 65)
Fiorentina win 4-3 on aggregate

Apr 17 – London
Chelsea (Eng) 1 (Cucurella 33)
Legia Warsaw (Pol) 2 (Pekhart 10 pen, Kapuadi 53)
Chelsea win 4-2 on aggregate

Apr 17 – Vienna
Rapid Vienna (Aut) 1 (Une 45+1 og)
Djurgarden (Swe) 4 (Danielson 42 pen, Kosugi 77, Gulliksen 93, 105)
After Extra-Time. Djurgarden win 4-2 on aggregate

2025 DUTCH CUP FINAL

Apr 21 – Rotterdam
AZ 1 (Parrott 54 pen)
Go Ahead Eagles 1 (Deijl 90+9 pen)
After Extra-Time. Go Ahead Eagles win 3-2 on pens

SOUTH AMERICA

2025 COPA LIBERTADORES

Group A

Apr 1 – Valencia
Carabobo (Ven) 0
Estudiantes (Arg) 2 (Nunez 45, Ascacibar 73 pen)

Apr 2 – Santiago
Universidad de Chile (Chi) 1 (Di Yorio 59)
Botafogo (Bra) 0

Apr 8 – Rio deJaneiro
Botafogo (Bra) 2 (Patrick 88, Martins 90+8)
Carabobo (Ven) 0

Apr 8 – La Plata
Estudiantes (Arg) 1 (Piovi 3)
Universidad de Chile (Chi) 2 (Aranguiz 7 pen, Zaldivia 10)

Apr 22 – Valencia
Carabobo (Ven) 1 (Tortolero 22 pen)
Universidad de Chile (Chi) 1 (Aranguiz 43 pen)

Apr 23 – La Plata
Estudiantes (Arg) 1 (Carrillo 38)
Botafogo (Bra) 0

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Universidad de Chile	3	2	1	0	4	2	7
Estudiantes	3	2	0	1	4	2	6
Botafogo	3	1	0	2	2	2	3
Carabobo	3	0	1	2	1	5	1

Group B

Apr 1 – Guayaquil
Barcelona (Ecu) 1 (Carabali 5)
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 0

Apr 2 – Lima
Universitario (Per) 0
River Plate (Arg) 1 (Diaz 17)

Apr 8 – Buenos Aires
River Plate (Arg) 0
Barcelona (Ecu) 0

Apr 8 – Quito
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 1 (Alcivar 82)
Universitario (Per) 0

Apr 22 – Guayaquil
Barcelona (Ecu) 0
Universitario (Per) 1 (E. Flores 31)

Apr 23 – Quito
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 2 (Spinelli 24, 30)
River Plate (Arg) 2 (Galoppo 68, Driussi 74)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
River Plate	3	1	2	0	3	2	5
Ind del Valle	3	1	1	1	3	3	4
Barcelona	3	1	1	1	1	1	4
Universitario	3	1	0	2	1	2	3

Group C

Apr 3 – Santiago del Estero
Central Cordoba (Arg) 0
LDU Quito (Ecu) 0

Apr 3 – San Cristobal
Deportivo Tachira (Ven) 0
Flamengo (Bra) 1 (Juninho 57)

Apr 9 – Rio deJaneiro
Flamengo (Bra) 1 (De la Cruz 60)
Central Cordoba (Arg) 2 (Heredia 24 pen, Florentin 44)

Apr 9 – Quito
LDU Quito (Ecu) 2 (Arce 73, 83)
Deportivo Tachira (Ven) 0

Apr 22 – Quito
LDU Quito (Ecu) 0
Flamengo (Bra) 0

Apr 24 – Santiago del Estero
Central Cordoba (Arg) 2 (Angulo 4, Quagliata 19)
Deportivo Tachira (Ven) 1 (Requena 37)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Central Cordoba	3	2	1	0	4	2	7
LDU Quito	3	1	2	0	2	0	5
Flamengo	3	1	1	1	2	2	4
Dep Tachira	3	0	0	3	1	5	0

Group D

Apr 1 – Lima
Alianza Lima (Per) 0
Libertad (Par) 1 (Aguilar 52)

Apr 2 – Cordoba
Talleres (Arg) 0
Sao Paulo (Bra) 1 (Alisson 76)

Apr 8 – Asuncion
Libertad (Par) 2 (Franco 9, Alcaraz 57)
Talleres (Arg) 0

Apr 10 – Sao Paulo
Sao Paulo (Bra) 2 (Ferreira 32, 37)
Alianza Lima (Per) 2 (E. Castillo 66, Quevedo 76)

Apr 22 – Lima
Alianza Lima (Per) 3 (Guerrero 11, 57, Barcos 90+5)
Talleres (Arg) 2 (Girotti 64 pen, 69)

Apr 23 – Asuncion
Libertad (Par) 0
Sao Paulo (Bra) 2 (Lucas Ferreira 62, Andre Silva 83)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sao Paulo	3	2	1	0	5	2	7
Libertad	3	2	0	1	3	2	6
Alianza Lima	3	1	1	1	5	5	4
Talleres	3	0	0	3	2	6	0

Group E

Apr 1 – Bucaramanga
Atletico Bucaramanga (Col) 3 (Londono 9, Pons 24, Henao 57)
Colo-Colo (Chi) 3 (Correa 38 pen, 84, Isla 63)

Apr 1 – Fortaleza
Fortaleza (Bra) 0
Racing (Arg) 3 (Salas 26, Almendra 48, Sosa 84)

Apr 10 – Avellaneda
Racing (Arg) 1 (Barrios 90+2)
Atletico Bucaramanga (Col) 2 (Pons 54, Sambueza 64)

Apr 10 – Santiago
Colo-Colo (Chi) -
Fortaleza (Bra) -
Match abandoned

Apr 22 – Santiago
Colo-Colo (Chi) 1 (Cepeda 9)
Racing (Arg) 1 (Barrios 86)

Apr 23 – Bucaramanga
Atletico Bucaramanga (Col) 1 (Pons 89 pen)
Fortaleza (Bra) 1 (Deyverson 19)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Atl Bucaramanga	3	1	2	0	6	5	5
Racing	3	1	1	1	5	3	4
Colo-Colo	2	0	2	0	4	4	2
Fortaleza	2	0	1	1	1	4	1

Group F

Apr 2 – Medellin
Atletico Nacional (Col) 3 (Hinestroza 45+2, Viveros 55, Morelos 72)
Nacional (Uru) 0

Apr 3 – Salvador
Bahia (Bra) 1 (Jean Lucas 73)
Internacional (Bra) 1 (Valencia 84)

Apr 9 – Montevideo
Nacional (Uru) 0
Bahia (Bra) 1 (Erick Pulga 64)

Apr 10 – Porto Alegre
Internacional (Bra) 3 (Alan Patrick 50 pen, 82 pen, 88)
Atletico Nacional (Col) 0

Apr 22 – Porto Alegre
Internacional (Bra) 3 (Alan Patrick 45+1, Bernabei 67, Fernando 73)
Nacional (Uru) 3 (Millan 6, Boggio 10, Coates 43)

Apr 24 – Salvador
Bahia (Bra) 1 (Willian Jose 71)
Atletico Nacional (Col) 0

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bahia	3	2	1	0	3	1	7
Internacional	3	1	2	0	7	4	5
Atletico Nacional	3	1	0	2	3	4	3
Nacional	3	0	1	2	3	7	1

Group G

Apr 1 – Asuncion
Cerro Porteno (Par) 4 (Torres 45+3, 47, 61, Morel 72)
Bolivar (Bol) 2 (R. Vaca 17, 89)

Apr 3 – Lima
Sporting Cristal (Per) 2 (Pretell 67, Tavara 83)
Palmeiras (Bra) 3 (Estevao 38, Piquerez 82 pen, Rios 90+2)

Apr 9 – La Paz
Bolivar (Bol) 3 (Gomes 12 pen, R. Vaca 44, 58)
Sporting Cristal (Per) 0

Apr 9 – Sao Paulo
Palmeiras (Bra) 1 (Rios 41)
Cerro Porteno (Par) 0

Apr 24 – La Paz
Bolivar (Bol) 2 (Gomes 56, 69)
Palmeiras (Bra) 3 (Lopez 19, Estevao 45, Mauricio 73)

Apr 24 – Asuncion
Cerro Porteno (Par) 2 (Dominguez 42, Carrizo 44)
Sporting Cristal (Per) 2 (Gonzalez 37, Lutiger 90+2)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Palmeiras	3	3	0	0	7	4	9
Cerro Porteno	3	1	1	1	6	5	4
Bolivar	3	1	0	2	7	7	3
Sporting Cristal	3	0	1	2	4	8	1

Group H

Apr 2 – Cochabamba
San Antonio Bulo Bulo (Bol) 3 (Viveros 30, Barboza 74, Herrera 90+11 pen)
Olimpia (Par) 2 (H. A. Benitez 64, Ortiz 79)

Apr 2 – Buenos Aires
Velez Sarsfield (Arg) 2 (Carrizo 80, Montoro 90+5)
Penarol (Uru) 1 (Fernandez 48)

Apr 8 – Montevideo
Penarol (Uru) 2 (Villalba 60, Machado 90+4)
San Antonio Bulo Bulo (Bol) 0

Apr 9 – Asuncion
Olimpia (Par) 0
Velez Sarsfield (Arg) 4 (Romero 25, 49 pen, Carrizo 56, Pizzini 90+3)

Apr 23 – Asuncion
Olimpia (Par) 0
Penarol (Uru) 0

Apr 23 – Cochabamba
San Antonio Bulo Bulo (Bol) 2 (E. Gomez 26 og, Santos 86 og)
Velez Sarsfield (Arg) 1 (Montoro 90)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Velez Sarsfield	3	2	0	1	7	3	6
SA Bulo Bulo	3	2	0	1	5	5	6
Penarol	3	1	1	1	3	2	4
Olimpia	3	0	1	2	2	7	1

2025 COPA SUDAMERICANA

Group A

Apr 1 – Montevideo
Boston River (Uru) 3 (A. Gonzalez 27, Noguera 50, Albarracin 72)
Guarani (Par) 3 (Mendieta 54, Fernandez 60, Vargas 90+1)

Apr 1 – Potosi
Nacional Potosi (Bol) 2 (Abrego 66, Diellos 83)
Independiente (Arg) 0

Apr 8 – Avellaneda
Independiente (Arg) 2 (Galdames 61, 90+1)
Boston River (Uru) 1 (Munoa 86)

Apr 10 – Asuncion
Guarani (Par) 2 (Fernandez 11, Patino 45+5)
Nacional Potosi (Bol) 0

Apr 22 – Asuncion
Guarani (Par) 2 (Vargas 28, 80)
Independiente (Arg) 1 (Loyola 60)

Apr 22 – Montevideo
Boston River (Uru) 2 (Albarracin 57, Martinez 70)
Nacional Potosi (Bol) 1 (Torrico 21)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Guarani	3	2	1	0	7	4	7
Boston River	3	1	1	1	6	6	4
Nacional Potosi	3	1	0	2	3	4	3
Independiente	3	1	0	2	3	5	3

Group B

Apr 2 – Salvador
Vitoria (Bra) 1 (Matheuzinho 76 pen)
Universidad Catolica (Eco) 1 (Londono 54)

Apr 3 – Montevideo
Cerro Largo (Uru) 0
Defensa y Justicia (Arg) 0

Apr 10 – Gobernador Costa
Defensa y Justicia (Arg) 0
Vitoria (Bra) 0

Apr 10 – Quito
Universidad Catolica (Eco) 3 (Londono 18, I. Diaz 45+1, 90+4)
Cerro Largo (Uru) 1 (Ferrares 75)

Apr 23 – Salvador
Vitoria (Bra) 0
Cerro Largo (Uru) 1 (Peraza 75)

Apr 24 – Quito
Universidad Catolica (Eco) 3 (I. Diaz 9 pen, 80, Moreno 70)
Defensa y Justicia (Arg) 1 (Gutierrez 14)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
U Catolica	3	2	1	0	7	3	7
Cerro Largo	3	1	1	1	2	3	4
Vitoria	3	0	2	1	1	2	2
Defensa y Justicia	3	0	2	1	1	3	2

Group C

Apr 2 – Sao Paulo
Corinthians (Bra) 1 (Raniele 13)
Huracan (Arg) 2 (Sequeira 6, 37)

Apr 2 – Montevideo
Racing (Uru) 1 (Da Silva 90+2)
America de Cali (Col) 3 (Holgado 13, Vergara 32, Ramos 83)

Apr 8 – Cali
America de Cali (Col) 1 (Ramos 24)
Corinthians (Bra) 1 (Matheuzinho 88)

Apr 9 – Buenos Aires
Huracan (Arg) 5 (Pereyra 8, Cotugno 19 og, De la Fuente 35, Urzi 45+2, Perez 53)
Racing (Uru) 0

Apr 23 – Buenos Aires
Huracan (Arg) 0
America de Cali (Col) 0

Apr 24 – Sao Paulo
Corinthians (Bra) 1 (Romero 52)
Racing (Uru) 0

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Huracan	3	2	1	0	7	1	7
America de Cali	3	1	2	0	4	2	5
Corinthians	3	1	1	1	3	3	4
Racing	3	0	0	3	1	9	0

Group D

Apr 2 – Asuncion
Sportivo Luqueno (Par) 1 (Santander 29)
Gremio (Bra) 2 (Arezo 17 pen, Braithwaite 71)

Apr 2 – Lima
Atletico Grau (Per) 0
Godoy Cruz (Arg) 2 (Mendoza 19, Fernandez 55)

Apr 8 – Porto Alegre
Gremio (Bra) 2 (Arezo 37, Olivera 67)
Atletico Grau (Per) 0

Apr 8 – Mendoza
Godoy Cruz (Arg) 2 (Mendoza 29, Pascual 90+3)
Sportivo Luqueno (Par) 0

Apr 23 – Lima
Atletico Grau (Per) 2 (Garro 44, Bandiera 90+3)
Sportivo Luqueno (Par) 2 (Ayala 8, Gonzalez 27)

Apr 24 – Mendoza
Godoy Cruz (Arg) 2 (Auzmendi 63, Martinez Dupuy 86)
Gremio (Bra) 2 (Edenilson 34, Aravena 81)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Godoy Cruz	3	2	1	0	6	2	7
Gremio	3	2	1	0	6	3	7
Sportivo Luqueno	3	0	1	2	3	6	1
Atletico Grau	3	0	1	2	2	6	1

Group E

Apr 1 – Santa Fe
Union (Arg) 1 (Diaz 90+4)
Cruzeiro (Bra) 0

Apr 3 – Riobamba
Mushuc Runa (Ecu) 3 (Haquin 41, Simisterra 75, Alonso 82)
Palestino (Chi) 2 (Marabel 71, Carrasco 90+3)

Apr 9 – Santiago
Palestino (Chi) 2 (Carrasco 12 pen, Marabel 90+6)
Union (Arg) 0

Apr 9 – Belo Horizonte
Cruzeiro (Bra) 1 (Gabriel 67 pen)
Mushuc Runa (Ecu) 2 (Orejuela 29, Bentaberry 77)

Apr 23 – Riobamba
Mushuc Runa (Ecu) 3 (Orejuela 3, Caicedo 52, Penilla 90+1)
Union (Arg) 0

Apr 24 – Coquimbo
Palestino (Chi) 2 (Benitez 40, Arias 86)
Cruzeiro (Bra) 1 (Eduardo 83)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mushuc Runa	3	3	0	0	8	3	9
Palestino	3	2	0	1	6	4	6
Union	3	1	0	2	1	5	3
Cruzeiro	3	0	0	3	2	5	0

Group F

Apr 1 – Manizales
Once Caldas (Col) 0
Fluminense (Bra) 1 (Cano 31)

Apr 3 – La Paz
GV San Jose (Bol) 1 (Lopez Pissano 88)
Union Espanola (Chi) 1 (Nunez 82)

Apr 9 – Vina del Mar
Union Espanola (Chi) 0
Once Caldas (Col) 2 (Moreno 57, A. Garcia 86)

Apr 10 – Rio deJaneiro
Fluminense (Bra) 5 (Everaldo 21, 44, Serna 59, Cano 73, 79)
GV San Jose (Bol) 0

Apr 22 – La Paz
GV San Jose (Bol) 2 (Becerra 70, Villamil 80)
Once Caldas (Col) 3 (Moreno 42, 73, 88)

Apr 23 – Santiago
Union Espanola (Chi) 1 (Aranguiz 83)
Fluminense (Bra) 1 (Nonato 90+3)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Fluminense	3	2	1	0	7	1	7
Once Caldas	3	2	0	1	5	3	6
Union Espanola	3	0	2	1	2	4	2
GV San Jose	3	0	1	2	3	9	1

Group G

Apr 2 – Arequipa
Melgar (Per) 3 (Rodriguez 39, Castro 80, Cabrera 90)
Vasco da Gama (Bra) 3 (Coutinho 3, Vegetti 32, 51)

Apr 3 – Valencia
Academia Puerto Cabello (Ven) 2 (Paredes 14, Awudu 50)
Lanus (Arg) 2 (Canelo 69, Aquino 75)

Apr 8 – Rio deJaneiro
Vasco da Gama (Bra) 1 (Vegetti 45+2)
Academia Puerto Cabello (Ven) 0

Apr 9 – Lanus
Lanus (Arg) 3 (Moreno 45+1, Salvio 47, Orozco 79)
Melgar (Per) 0

Apr 22 – Rio de Janeiro
Vasco da Gama (Bra) 0
Lanus (Arg) 0

Apr 22 – Arequipa
Melgar (Per) 1 (Barrios 42)
Academia Puerto Cabello (Ven) 0

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lanus	3	1	2	0	5	2	5
Vasco da Gama	3	1	2	0	4	3	5
Melgar	3	1	1	1	4	6	4
Academia PC	3	0	1	2	2	4	1

Group H

Apr 1 – Iquique
Deportes Iquique (Chi) 1 (Puch 4 pen)
Caracas (Ven) 2 (Echenique 33, Aguilar 37)

Apr 1 – Cusco
Cienciano (Per) 0
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 0

Apr 8 – Caracas
Caracas (Ven) 2 (Reinoso 8, Rondon 90+9)
Cienciano (Per) 2 (Garces 41, 66)

Apr 10 – Belo Horizonte
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 4 (Rony 1, Hulk 11 pen, Natanael 35, Scarpa 66 pen)
Deportes Iquique (Chi) 0

Apr 23 – Caracas
Caracas (Ven) 1 (De Santis 66)
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 1 (Rodriguez 24 og)

Apr 24 – Iquique
Deportes Iquique (Chi) 2 (Pino 29, Fuentes 65)
Cienciano (Per) 2 (Gentile 24, Garces 90+9)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Atletico Mineiro	3	1	2	0	5	1	5
Caracas	3	1	2	0	5	4	5
Cienciano	3	0	3	0	4	4	3
Dep Iquique	3	0	1	2	3	8	1

ASIA

2024-25 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TWO

West Region

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 8 – Buraidah
Al Taawoun (KSA) 1 (Sabiri 2)
Sharjah (UAE) 0

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Apr 15 – Sharjah
Sharjah (UAE) 2 (Camara 90+4, Ben Arbi 90+9)
Al Taawoun (KSA) 0
Sharjah win 2-1 on aggregate

East Region

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 9 – Singapore
Lion City Sailors (Sgp) 2 (Ramselaar 18, Thy 53)
Sydney FC (Aus) 0

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Apr 16 – Sydney
Sydney FC (Aus) 1 (Lolley 85)
Lion City Sailors (Sgp) 0
Lion City Sailors win 2-1 on aggregate

2024-25 AFC CHALLENGE LEAGUE

West Region

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 9 – Sulaibikhat
Al Arabi (Kuw) 2 (Chrisopher 70, Al Awadhi 90+3)
Arkadag (Tkm) 0

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Apr 16 – Arkadag
Arkadag (Tkm) 3 (Tirkisow 7, 90+4, Annadurdyyew 58)
Al Arabi (Kuw) 0
Arkadag win 3-2 on aggregate

East Region

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 10 – Phnom Penh
Preah Khan Reach Svay Rieng (Cam) 3 (Breninho 4, Bounkong 6, Ratanak 90)
Madura United (Idn) 0

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Apr 17 – Gresik
Madura United (Idn) 3 (Monteiro 27, Irfan 58, Dara 76 og)
Preah Khan Reach Svay Rieng (Cam) 3 (Gabriel Silva 5, Bounkong 28, Ratanak 56)
PKR Svay Rieng win 6-3 on aggregate

INDIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mohun Bagan* (C)	24	17	5	2	47	16	56
Goa*	24	14	6	4	43	27	48
Bengaluru**	24	11	5	8	40	31	38
NorthEast United**	24	10	8	6	46	29	38
Jamshedpur**	24	12	2	10	37	43	38
Mumbai City**	24	9	9	6	29	28	36
Odisha	24	8	9	7	44	37	33
Kerala Blasters	24	8	5	11	33	37	29
East Bengal	24	8	4	12	27	33	28
Punjab	24	8	4	12	34	38	28
Chennaiyin	24	7	6	11	34	39	27
Hyderabad	24	4	6	14	22	47	18
Mohammedan	24	2	7	15	12	43	13

*Advance to semi-finals
**Advance to finals play-offs

Finals Play-Offs

Mar 29 – Bangalore
Bengaluru 5 (S. Singh 9, Mendez 42 pen, Williams 62, Chhetri 76, Pereyra Diaz 83)
Mumbai City 0

Mar 30 – Shillong
NorthEast United 0
Jamshedpur 2 (Eze 29, Hernandez 90+9)

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 2 – Bangalore
Bengaluru 2 (Jhingan 42 og, Mendez 51)
Goa 0

Apr 3 – Jamshedpur
Jamshedpur 2 (Siverio 24, Hernandez 90+1)
Mohun Bagan 1 (Cummings 37)

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Apr 6 – Margao
Goa 2 (Herrera 49, Sadiku 88)
Bengaluru 1 (Chhetri 90+2)
Bengaluru win 3-2 on aggregate

Apr 7 – Kolkata
Mohun Bagan 2 (Cummings 51 pen, Ralte 90+4)
Jamshedpur 0
Mohun Bagan win 3-2 on aggregate

Final

Apr 12 – Kolkata
Mohun Bagan 2 (Cummings 72 pen, Maclaren 96)
Bengaluru 1 (Rodriguez 49 pen)
After Extra-Time

MALAYSIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Johor Darul Ta'zim (C)	24	23	1	0	90	8	70
Selangor	24	16	4	4	44	16	52
Sabah	24	11	7	6	41	33	40
Kuching City	24	10	9	5	38	28	39
Terengganu	24	9	8	7	35	26	35
Kuala Lumpur City*	24	11	4	9	40	33	31
Perak	24	8	6	10	36	36	30
Sri Pahang	24	7	8	9	35	39	29
PDRM	24	7	6	11	25	36	27
Pulau Pinang	24	6	8	10	31	38	26
Kedah**	24	6	6	12	21	51	21
Negeri Sembilan	24	4	4	16	23	49	16
Kelantan Darul Naim	24	2	1	21	16	82	7

*Deducted 6 points **Deducted 3 points

MYANMAR

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Shan United (C)	22	20	2	0	65	12	62
Yangon United	22	15	6	1	62	20	51
Hantharwady United	22	13	5	4	34	26	44
Dagon Star United	22	12	4	6	36	22	40
Mahar United	22	10	3	9	44	40	33
Yadanarbon	22	8	7	7	37	39	31
ISPE	22	8	5	9	31	31	29
Thitsar Arman	22	7	3	12	39	44	24
Ayeyawady United	22	5	2	15	21	36	17
Dagon Port	22	4	5	13	37	67	17
Rakhine United (R)	22	3	5	14	23	62	14
Myawady (R)	22	2	3	17	19	49	9

QATAR

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Sadd (C)	22	17	1	4	62	23	52
Al Duhail	22	16	2	4	51	20	50
Al Gharafa	22	12	5	5	41	30	41
Al Ahli	22	10	5	7	38	39	35
Al Rayyan	22	10	3	9	45	35	33
Al Shamal	22	10	2	10	41	34	32
Al Shahaniya	22	8	3	11	31	43	27
Al Wakrah	22	7	4	11	27	40	25
Al Arabi	22	6	5	11	32	49	23
Qatar SC	22	6	5	11	26	44	23
Umm Salal*	22	6	3	13	27	43	21
Al Khor (R)	22	3	4	15	21	42	13

*Enter relegation play-off

CONCACAF

2025 CONCACAF CHAMPIONS CUP

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 1 – Mexico City
America (Mex) 0
Cruz Azul (Mex) 0

Apr 1 – Carson
LAFC (USA) 0
Tigres UANL (Mex) 0

Apr 2 – Los Angeles
LA Galaxy (USA) 1 (Ordaz 57)
Inter Miami (USA) 0

Apr 2 – Vancouver
Vancouver Whitecaps (Can) 1 (White 71)
Pumas UNAM (Mex) 1 (Carrasquilla 87)

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Apr 8 – Mexico City
Cruz Azul (Mex) 2 (Sepulveda 12, 85)
America (Mex) 1 (Fidalgo 57)
Cruz Azul win 2-1 on aggregate

Apr 8 – San Nicolas de los Garza
Tigres UANL (Mex) 3 (Ibanez 9, Antuna 10, Romulo 57)
LAFC (USA) 2 (Paintsil 40, Garces 60)
Tigres UANL win 3-2 on aggregate

Apr 9 – Fort Lauderdale
Inter Miami (USA) 3 (Messi 35, 84 pen, Redondo 61)
LA Galaxy (USA) 1 (Long 9)
Inter Miami win 3-2 on aggregate

Apr 9 – Mexico City
Pumas UNAM (Mex) 2 (Martinez 37, Pussetto 88)
Vancouver Whitecaps (Can) 2 (Berhalter 33, Blackmon 90+3)
3-3 on aggregate
Vancouver Whitecaps win on away goals

BERMUDA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
North Village Rams (C)	18	12	1	5	46	20	37
Pembroke Hamilton	18	11	3	4	42	22	36
St. George's Colts	18	9	5	4	45	32	32
Paget Lions	18	9	4	5	34	28	31
Devonshire Cougars	18	8	4	6	37	35	28
Devonshire Colts	18	8	3	7	32	28	27
Dandy Town Hornets	18	8	2	8	37	31	26
YMSC	18	4	2	12	23	47	14
Hamilton Parish (R)	18	3	3	12	26	49	12
Wolves Sports Club (R)	18	3	3	12	25	55	12

SINT MAARTEN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
SCSA Eagles (C)	15	14	1	0	63	14	43
United Super Stars	15	11	1	3	47	16	34
Belvedere	15	7	2	6	37	39	23
758 Boyz	15	6	1	8	29	46	19
Soualiga	15	2	1	12	30	46	7
Oualichi SA	15	0	4	11	8	53	4

TURKS & CAICOS

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Academy Eagles*	6	6	0	0	35	3	18
SWA Sharks	6	5	0	1	31	8	15
Beaches	6	3	1	2	16	12	10
Teachers	6	3	0	3	17	8	9
Provo United	6	2	0	4	13	28	6
Cheshire Hall	6	1	1	4	14	16	4
Teachers YS	6	0	0	6	3	54	0

*Advance to championship play-off

Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
SWA Sharks* (C)	6	5	1	0	34	8	16
Academy Eagles	6	4	1	1	16	2	13
Cheshire Hall	6	3	1	2	15	16	10
Provo United	6	3	0	3	15	18	9
Teachers	6	2	2	2	16	8	8
Beaches	6	1	1	4	7	13	4
Teachers YS	6	0	0	6	4	42	0

*Advance to championship play-off

Championship Play-Off

Mar 22: Academy Eagles 3-3 SWA Sharks (*AET, SWA Sharks win 5-4 on pens*)

AFRICA

2024-25 CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 1 – Cairo
Al Ahly (Egy) 1 (Hany 11)
Al Hilal (Sud) 0

Apr 1 – Cairo
Pyramids (Egy) 4 (Mayele 2, 12, Adel 38, 67)
AS FAR (Mar) 1 (Hadraf 45)

Apr 1 – Pretoria
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 1 (Shalulile 54)
Esperance (Tun) 0

Apr 1 – Algiers
MC Alger (Alg) 0
Orlando Pirates (RSA) 1 (Nkota 65)

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Apr 8 – Nouakchott
Al Hilal (Sud) 0
Al Ahly (Egy) 1 (Ashour 80)
Al Ahly win 2-0 on aggregate

Apr 8 – Meknes
AS FAR (Mar) 2 (El Fahli 8, Beya 82)
Pyramids (Egy) 0
Pyramids win 4-3 on aggregate

Apr 8 – Tunis
Esperance (Tun) 0
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 0
Mamelodi Sundowns win 1-0 on aggregate

Apr 9 – Johannesburg
Orlando Pirates (RSA) 0
MC Alger (Alg) 0
Orlando Pirates win 1-0 on aggregate

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 19 – Pretoria
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 0
Al Ahly (Egy) 0

Apr 18 – Johannesburg
Orlando Pirates (RSA) 0
Pyramids (Egy) 0

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Apr 25 – Cairo
Al Ahly (Egy) 1 (Mohamed 24)
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 1 (Ibrahim 90 og)
1-1 on aggregate
Mamelodi Sundowns win on away goals

Apr 25 – Cairo
Pyramids (Egy) 3 (Mayele 45+1, 84, Sobhi 57)
Orlando Pirates (RSA) 2 (Mofokeng 41, Nkota 52)
Pyramids win 3-2 on aggregate

2024-25 CAF CONFEDERATION CUP

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 2 – Cape Town
Stellenbosch (RSA) 0
Zamalek (Egy) 0

Apr 2 – Abidjan
ASEC Abidjan (Civ) 0
RS Berkane (Mar) 1 (Riahi 75)

Apr 2 – Constantine
CS Constantine (Alg) 1 (Temine 29)
USM Alger (Alg) 1 (Mondeko 73)

Apr 2 – Suez
Al Masry (Egy) 2 (Deghmoum 16, Ebuka 89)
Simba (Tan) 0

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Apr 9 – Cairo
Zamalek (Egy) 0
Stellenbosch (RSA) 1 (Nduli 79)
Stellenbosch win 1-0 on aggregate

Apr 9 – Berkane
RS Berkane (Mar) 1 (Lamlioui 76)
ASEC Abidjan (Civ) 0
RS Berkane win 2-0 on aggregate

Apr 9 – Algiers
USM Alger (Alg) 1 (Alilet 25 pen)
CS Constantine (Alg) 1 (Belhocini 56)
2-2 on aggregate
CS Constantine win 4-3 on pens

Apr 9 – Dar es Salaam
Simba (Tan) 2 (Mpanzu 22, Mukwala 32)
Al Masry (Egy) 0
2-2 on aggregate, Simba win 4-1 on pens

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 20 – Berkane
RS Berkane (Mar) 4 (Mehri 1, Bassene 21, Lamlioui 54, 90+2)
CS Constantine (Alg) 0

Apr 20 – Zanzibar City
Simba (Tan) 1 (Ahoua 45+2)
Stellenbosch (RSA) 0

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Apr 27 – Constantine
CS Constantine (Alg) 1 (Belhocini 47)
RS Berkane (Mar) 0
RS Berkane win 4-1 on aggregate

Apr 27 – Durban
Stellenbosch (RSA) 0
Simba (Tan) 0
Simba win 1-0 on aggregate

SEYCHELLES

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cote d'Or (C)	18	11	5	2	38	20	38
Anse Reunion	18	11	5	2	28	18	38
Lightstars	18	9	5	4	32	22	32
Foresters FC	18	6	6	6	27	23	24
Saint Louis	18	6	6	6	31	31	24
Real Maldives	18	5	6	7	30	33	21
Bazar Brothers	18	5	5	8	28	28	20
St Michel United	18	5	3	10	18	27	18
La Passe	18	4	5	9	29	36	17
Northern Dynamo (R)	18	4	2	12	24	47	14

OCEANIA

2025 OFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Group A

Mar 30 – Honiara
Tiga Sport (Ncl) 4 (Partodikromo 14 pen, Waia 45, Wadra 50, Upa 56)
Rewa (Fij) 2 (Valevou 30, Orobulu 72)

Mar 30 – Honiara
Auckland City (Nzl) 1 (Manickum 41)
Pirae (Tah) 0

Apr 2 – Honiara
Rewa (Fij) 0
Pirae (Tah) 1 (Tihoni 90+18 pen)

Apr 2 – Honiara
Auckland City (Nzl) 2 (Manickum 25, Zeb 90+4)
Tiga Sport (Ncl) 0

Apr 5 – Honiara
Pirae (Tah) 1 (Tave 35)
Tiga Sport (Ncl) 1 (Partodikromo 65 pen)

Apr 5 – Honiara
Rewa (Fij) 1 (Orobulu 90+5)
Auckland City (Nzl) 1 (Zeb 12)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Auckland City*	3	2	1	0	4	1	7
Tiga Sport*	3	1	1	1	5	5	4
Pirae	3	1	1	1	2	2	4
Rewa	3	0	1	2	3	6	1

*Advance to knockout stage

Group B

Mar 31 – Honiara
Ifira Black Bird (Van) 3 (Lency 10 pen, Tenene 26, Tasip 63)
Tupapa Maraerenga (Cok) 0

Mar 31 – Honiara
Hekari United (PNG) 3 (Santos 12, J. Joe 52, Wally 87)
Central Coast (Sol) 0

Apr 3 – Honiara
Ifira Black Bird (Van) 1 (Tasip 67)
Hekari United (PNG) 1 (E. Joe 81)

Apr 3 – Honiara
Central Coast (Sol) 7 (Oreinima 8, 45, 49, 59, 66, Leslie 22, Supa 82)
Tupapa Maraerenga (Cok) 0

Apr 6 – Honiara
Tupapa Maraerenga (Cok) 0
Hekari United (PNG) 9 (Santos 20, Naime 27, 36, 59, Eddie 38, 50, Paul 47, 68, J. Joe 56 pen)

Apr 6 – Honiara
Central Coast (Sol) 1 (Tahioa 64)
Ifira Black Bird (Van) 1 (Tenene 47)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Hekari United*	3	2	1	0	13	1	7
Ifira Black Bird*	3	1	2	0	5	2	5
Central Coast	3	1	1	1	8	4	4
Tupapa Maraerenga	3	0	0	3	0	19	0

*Advance to knockout stage

Semi-Finals

Apr 9 – Honiara
Auckland City (Nzl) 2 (Zeb 25, Bevan 86)
Ifira Black Bird (Van) 0

Apr 9 – Honiara
Hekari United (PNG) 1 (Naime 27)
Tiga Sport (Ncl) 0

Final

Apr 12 – Honiara
Auckland City (Nzl) 2 (Bevan 39, 83 pen)
Hekari United (PNG) 0

Internationals

2026 WORLD CUP QUALIFYING

EUROPE Section

● *16 direct slots available*

Group G
Jun 7: Malta v Lithuania; Finland v Netherlands
Jun 10: Finland v Poland; Netherlands v Malta

Group H
Jun 7: Bosnia & Herzegovina v San Marino; Austria v Romania
Jun 10: Romania v Cyprus; San Marino v Austria

Group I
Jun 6: Estonia v Israel; Norway v Italy
Jun 9: Estonia v Norway; Italy v Moldova

Group J
Jun 6: North Macedonia v Belgium; Wales v Liechtenstein
Jun 9: Kazakhstan v North Macedonia; Belgium v Wales

Group K
Jun 7: Andorra v England; Albania v Serbia
Jun 10: Latvia v Albania; Serbia v Andorra

Group L
Jun 6: Czech Republic v Montenegro; Gibraltar v Croatia
Jun 9: Faroe Islands v Gibraltar; Croatia v Czech Republic

SOUTH AMERICA Section

● *6 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

Matchday 15
Jun 5-6:
Colombia v Peru; Venezuela v Bolivia; Paraguay v Uruguay; Chile v Argentina; Ecuador v Brazil

Matchday 16
Jun 10:
Uruguay v Venezuela; Peru v Ecuador; Brazil v Paraguay; Bolivia v Chile; Argentina v Colombia

ASIA Section

● *8 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

Third Round

Group A
Jun 5: Qatar v Iran; United Arab Emirates v Uzbekistan; North Korea v Kyrgyzstan
Jun 10: Iran v North Korea; Uzbekistan v Qatar; Kyrgyzstan v United Arab Emirates

Group B
Jun 5: Iraq v South Korea; Oman v Jordan; Kuwait v Palestine
Jun 10: South Korea v Kuwait; Jordan v Iraq; Palestine v Oman

Group C
Jun 5: Australia v Japan; Indonesia v China; Bahrain v Saudi Arabia
Jun 10: Japan v Indonesia; China v Bahrain; Saudi Arabia v Australia

CONCACAF Section

● *3 direct slots available, plus 2 play-off slots (along with 3 host nations)*

Second Round

Group A
Jun 4: Bermuda v Cayman Islands
Jun 6-7: Antigua & Barbuda v Cuba; Cayman Islands v Honduras
Jun 10: Cuba v Bermuda; Honduras v Antigua & Barbuda

Group B
Jun 4: Grenada v Bahamas
Jun 6-7: Trinidad & Tobago v St Kitts & Nevis; Bahamas v Costa Rica
Jun 10: St Kitts & Nevis v Grenada; Costa Rica v Trinidad & Tobago

Group C
Jun 4: Barbados v Aruba
Jun 6-7: Curacao v St Lucia; Aruba v Haiti
Jun 10: St Lucia v Barbados; Haiti v Curacao

Group D
Jun 4: Montserrat v Belize
Jun 6-7: Nicaragua v Guyana; Belize v Panama
Jun 10: Guyana v Montserrat; Panama v Nicaragua

Group E
Jun 4: Dominica v British Virgin Islands
Jun 6-7: Guatemala v Dominican Republic; British Virgin Islands v Jamaica
Jun 10: Dominican Republic v Dominica; Jamaica v Guatemala

Group F
Jun 4: St Vincent & Grenadines v Anguilla
Jun 6-7: Suriname v Puerto Rico; Anguilla v El Salvador
Jun 10: Puerto Rico v St Vincent & Grenadines; El Salvador v Suriname

2024-25 UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE

Semi-Finals
Jun 4-5: Germany v Portugal; Spain v France
Final and third-place play-off take place on June 8

2027 ASIAN CUP QUALIFIERS

Group A
Jun 10: Timor-Leste v Maldives; Philippines v Tajikistan

Group B
Jun 10: Brunei v Bhutan; Yemen v Lebanon

Group C
Jun 10:
Bangladesh v Singapore; Hong Kong v India

Group D
Jun 10: Sri Lanka v Taiwan; Turkmenistan v Thailand

Group E
Jun 10: Pakistan v Myanmar; Afghanistan v Syria

Group F
Jun 10: Laos v Nepal; Malaysia v Vietnam

FRIENDLIES

May 26: Jamaica v Trinidad & Tobago
May 27: Nigeria v Ghana
Jun 4: Cambodia v Tajikistan
Jun 5: Algeria v Rwanda; Bulgaria v Cyprus; Russia v Nigeria; Georgia v Faroe Islands
Jun 6: Hungary v Sweden; Luxembourg v Slovenia; Scotland v Iceland; Poland v Moldova; Republic of Ireland v Senegal; Greece v Slovakia; Morocco v Tunisia; Kosovo v Armenia
Jun 7: Denmark v Northern Ireland; USA v Turkey; Canada v Ukraine; Mexico v Switzerland; New Zealand v Ivory Coast; Latvia v Azerbaijan
Jun 9: Liechtenstein v Scotland; Azerbaijan v Hungary; Greece v Bulgaria; Belarus v Russia; Morocco v Benin; Denmark v Lithuania; Montenegro v Armenia
Jun 10: Slovenia v Bosnia-Herzegovina; Sweden v Algeria; Northern Ireland v Iceland; England v Senegal; Luxembourg v Republic of Ireland; New Zealand v Ukraine; USA v Switzerland; Mexico v Turkey; Canada v Ivory Coast

2025 UNDER-21 EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIP

Group A
Jun 11: Slovakia v Spain; Italy v Romania
Jun 14: Spain v Romania; Slovakia v Italy
Jun 17: Romania v Slovakia; Spain v Italy

Group B
Jun 12: Czech Rep v England; Germany v Slovenia
Jun 15: England v Slovenia; Czech Rep v Germany
Jun 18: Slovenia v Czech Rep; England v Germany

Group C
Jun 11: Portugal v France; Poland v Georgia
Jun 14: Portugal v Poland; France v Georgia
Jun 17: Georgia v Portugal; France v Poland

Group D
Jun 12: Ukraine v Denmark; Finland v Netherlands
Jun 15: Finland v Ukraine; Netherlands v Denmark
Jun 18: Denmark v Finland; Netherlands v Ukraine
Quarter-finals take place on June 21-22, with the semi-finals on June 25 and final on June 28

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16-PAGE SUPPLEMENT...

2025 Women's Euros

- PREVIEW, FIXTURES & SCHEDULE
- GROUP GUIDES WITH TEAM PROFILES
- PLUS...HUGE EURO 2025 WALLCHART

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